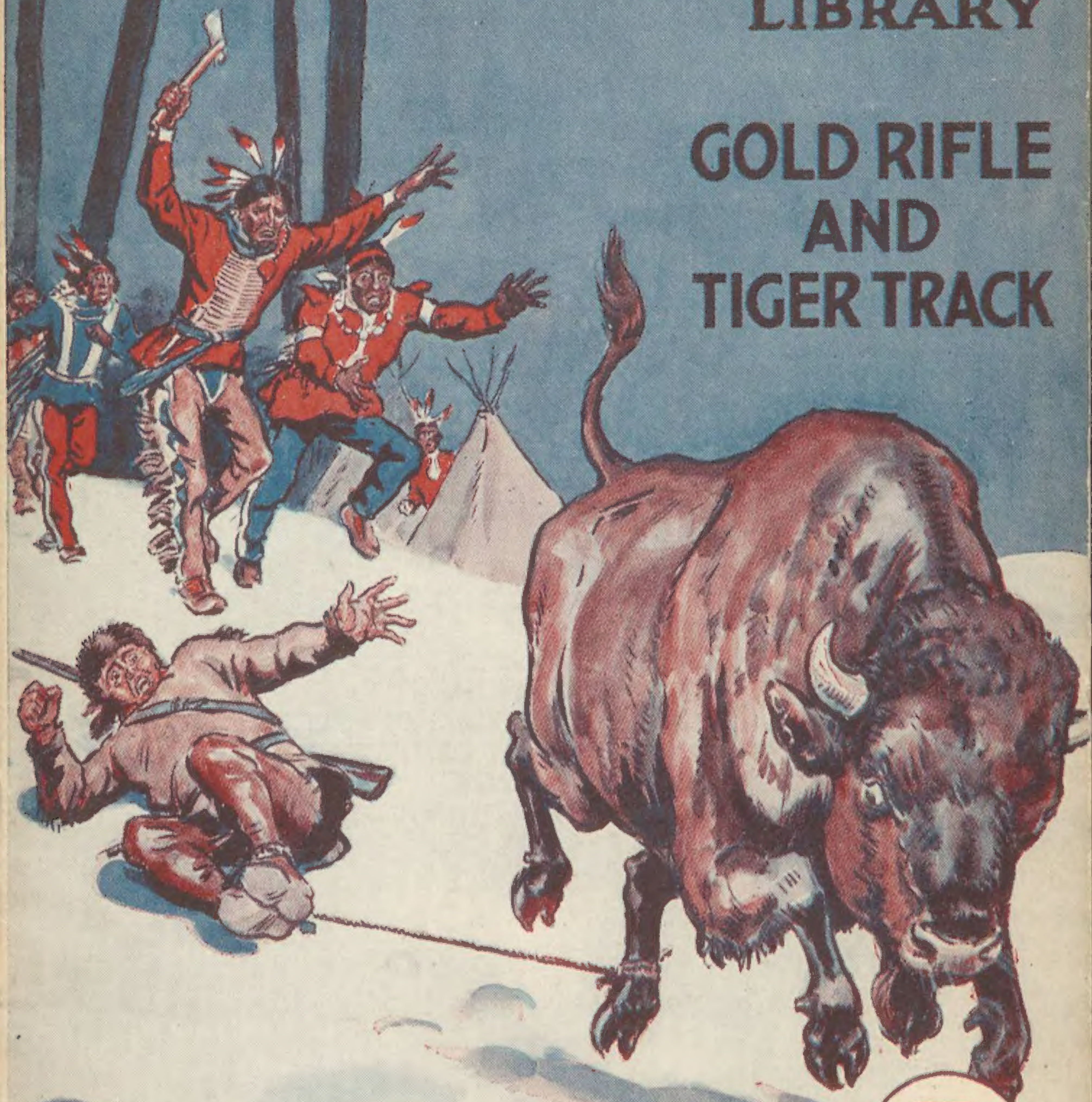


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GOLD RIFLE AND TIGER TRACK

CHAPTER I

THE CHARMED GOBBLER

THE bright, hot summer on the plains had gone, followed by its next brilliant-hued neighbour, autumn, and winter had spread her mantle over the prairies and mountains of the Far West—showered her feathery-white flakes down so copiously that the wilderness was, as it were, impassable except with the aid of snow-shoes.

A terrible storm had fallen furiously over the Northwest, for four days preceding Christmas, and when the bright, yellow sun slanted her rays across the plains of white, after so long an absence, it seemed like a loving smile on Nature's deathly face, and millions of sparkling diamond-like particles were born in the glorious illumination of God's shining countenance.

Very little of life had there been on the frontier during the last week—I mean out on the wide savannas, where the snow had fallen to the depth of four or five feet on the level. Most of the wild, roving spirits who make the plain their home—trappers, hunters and outlaws—had hied themselves either to the settlements, a few of which were scattered along the course of the Northern Pacific Railway, in Dakota, or to their individual retreats, wherever they might be.

There was one little settlement where a larger share of this floating population had gathered, during the protracted storm—a station where the steam horse of the rail stopped for wood and water; and too, which was a trappers' trading station, from whence peltries were shipped by car-loads to the East.

From its insignificance, perhaps, the place had never adopted any high-toned name, but whenever mentioned, was called the Settlement, which answered all purposes.

Its only life and commerce were in the skin and fur trade. Fifteen or twenty dwelling cabins, and a tavern block-house and smithy was all there was of the Settlement.

Away to the south but a matter of four miles loomed up the Fort, garrisoned with soldiers, under the command of General Maynard, and around it were scattered a few settlers' dwellings, prominent among which was the neat farm-house or "quarters" of General Maynard.

Thus, the territory adjacent was settled sparsely, but this did not prevent frequent raids by Tiger Track's outlaws, and the roving tribes of red-skins who hunted on the plains and in the mountains, not a dozen miles westward from the Settlement.

At the Settlement, on this crystal clear morning, all was a buzz of excitement.

The event of the great holiday was to be a turkey shoot, and not only the trappers and citizens of the Settlement, but the military from the fort, under Acting Captain Bass, had promised to be present and take a hand.

They were as handsome, well-behaved and well-drilled a squad of Uncle Sam's boys as held a fort in the territory, and naturally great expectations were born of their participation in the "shoot."

At early after-dinner hour, they had arrived with their band, on the spot, and all in the Settlement were congregated on the white snows of a level prairie, a few hundred yards north of the station. There were men, women and children, of almost every cast of countenance and attire; some mounted upon horses—others standing calf deep in the snow.

By noon the excessive sharpness of the weather had melted beneath the smiles of the sun, and it was quite comfortable out, except under foot.

Besides the soldiers from the fort, there were present many hunters, trappers and

scouts who had won and lost fortunes in the fur business.

The range for shooting was three hundred yards, with Remington rifles, breech-loaders, sixteen shot.

A turkey was to be "stooled" at the far end of the range, and each man who had entered to shoot, at the cost of a "quarter," had three chances to knock the bird over, if he could, and carry off the fowl as his prize.

The "shoot" was under the management of a couple of backwoodsmen who had raised the turkeys, and had taken this method of securing a good round price for them.

About two o'clock the sport commenced, with a grand blare of music from the military band, which had volunteered its services for the occasion.

An old trapper named Strong led off on the first fowl, but failed to disturb a feather, or even the composure of the turkey. The white covering of the prairie made it bad for good shooting, and as a consequence the fowl at the end of the range stood a good show of not being hit at all.

"By gracious!" exclaimed the man Strong, as he heard the announcement that he had not created a gobble from the turkey, "thet aire ther wu'st shootin' I evyer did, fer a fact. I'm generally *sum*, w'en et cums ter turkey shutes, ef I do say it, an' no one'll allow as Zeke Strong ever lied jest fer bein' famuss."

"Get out, Strong! You're no good as a shot, and everybody knows it!" retorted Jay Toleman, a youth rising twenty years, the son of the chief trader of the Settlement, and an acknowledged crack-shot. "You're 'way off yer groove when you tackle anything beyond a mink-trap."

"Oh! you needn't blow, you young cuss of a bullpurp!" growled back Strong, angrily, for he did not like to be told that he was behind the average. "I've seen them as ked shute ye cl'ar out an' out, an' not half-try. Thar's thet Tiger Track, ther outlaw—I've heerd sed he could brush a speck off 'm a fly's eye-winker at a distance of three hundred yards."

"Oh! shut up yer lyin', you old snake, if you don't want to git knifed. I hain't in no mood fer yer chin, ter-day," replied Toleman.

Jay Toleman was, as mentioned, the son of Jacob Toleman, the proprietor of the trading-post in the Settlement.

The elder Toleman was a rude, ruffianly customer, and it was but natural that he should bring his son up to his own standard. And Jay Toleman, as he approached his

majority, had developed into a desperate character, who was equally feared and hated by the border men. He was reckless, ruffianly and revengeful, and carried with him a conceit that made him the more disgusting to those he came in contact with.

Some half a dozen trappers followed Strong in his attempt to knock over the turkey, but beyond the loss of a few feathers, the bird remained unharmed.

Jay Toleman at last took the stand with a satisfied smile, and raising his long rifle, shot the turkey's head off, with as much composure as though he had been firing at random.

Another bird was speedily put up, and several shots were fired, some of which brushed the bird, but failed to knock it over.

When it came Toleman's shot, he settled the matter with one bullet.

And so the shooting went on, the young crack-shot winning every time, much to his own elation and the disgust of the crowd. Such shooting was beyond the average—incomprehensible.

Many of the trappers refused to shoot against such odds, and withdrew from the contest, but there were enough others confident in their skill, to keep the *entree* full, and the shooting exciting.

But Toleman won every time, and at last the only remaining fowl was put upon the stool. He was a monstrous turkey gobbler—the largest any of the spectators had ever seen. He had a body several times larger than that of the average domesticated goose, and the owners announced his weight to be seventy-five pounds! He truly was a noble and aristocratic old fellow, with a disdainful gobble, as he took the stand, and a cheer went up for him from the crowd.

During the prevalent excitement, a horseman had approached from the west, and sitting in his saddle, was casually surveying the crowd, and the prize gobbler.

About twenty years had passed over his head, but these years had been busied in perfecting and developing what was now a handsome form, stout, pliable, and athletic, capable of celerity, great strength and endurance.

The stranger was clad in a serviceable hunting costume of buckskin, liberally fringed with mink fur, a round mink cap, and knee-boots upon the feet. He was mounted upon a wiry little white mustang, of fiery spirit and wicked eye, and his saddle and its accoutrements were handsome. In his belt were revolvers, a knife, and field telescope, at the back of his saddle a bow and quiver of arrows were attached:

while, resting across the pommel in front of him, was a gold-plated Remington repeating rifle. It was a remarkable-looking weapon, the barrel and all the steel parts being heavily plated with gold, and polished until they shone brightly. The sight at the muzzle of the barrel was set with a flashing diamond!

Toward this young stranger and his remarkable rifle many inquiring glances were levelled, but he appeared quite undisturbed, and watched the shooting for old King Gobbler, which was now begun.

Shot after shot was fired without the least reward, for the King Gobbler stood proudly upon the stool, with his great fan-tail outspread, and occasionally emitting a gobble of indignation as the bullets whizzed past.

Rapidly the contestants thinned down to a little bunch, and still the turkey remained untouched, and the excitement grew in its intensity.

What mystery was this? asked these astonished people. Was the old Gobbler possessed of a charmed life?

It was an enigma, and when even Jay Toleman finished the last of his three shots, unsuccessfully, loud expressions of wonder were heard on every side, while the young bully cursed and swore in a frightful manner.

"String's over, fellers!" cried one of the owners of the gobbler. "Three hundred and thirty-three shots plugged at thet aire turk, but nary a one tuk effect. Allow me ter remark, gentlemen, that thet fowl has bin put up at five different shoots, but nevyer got hit yet. He bears a charmed life, an' is two years old. Any one else wanter try their luck fer a quarter, aside frum them as has shot?"

"Hayr! I'll shoot again!" growled young Toleman, tendering a quarter. "I was too nervous before."

"Can't help that, young feller; you're not entitled ter ernuther shot, no more'n the rest. Sum feller as hain't plugged come for'a'd. Hey, you gold rifle chap, can't you hit thet gobbler?"

"Guess so," was the reply of the stranger. "Thet ain't half a shot; can stand on my head and knock that gobbler's phiz off."

A loud yell went up at the extraordinary boast.

Gold Rifle, as the young stranger had been quickly named, rapidly made preparations for his feat. A large, wide piece of board was packed down upon the snow, and upon this Gold Rifle took his position.

An Indian boy stood close by, with the gold rifle, which was cocked and ready for use.

After glancing at the dimly discernible gobbler, and smiling at the applause of the crowd, he knelt upon the board and raised his body into the air, and in a moment was perfectly balanced on his head, his feet erect in mid-air, his hands free.

The rifle was handed him—in a moment he had sighted it, fired, and somersaulted back upon his feet, while wild and loud rang the huzzas when it was seen that the *bullet had dropped the King Gobbler!* Later the fowl was brought in, and it was found that his head had been severed from his body. And Gold Rifle was victor.

CHAPTER II

A VILLAINOUS ACCUSATION

"HELLO, Toleman! whar aire ye, now?" shouted the man, Zeke Strong, who was hugely overjoyed that some one should be found to carry off the big gobbler, aside from the young bully. "Hain't ther best shot on ther border now, aire ye?"

"I'm a little off to-day," was the reply, in rather a crestfallen manner, "but I kin do more surprisin' feats than that."

The enthusiasm over Gold Rifle's wonderful shot was intense.

Captain Bass, of the military, came forward and locked arms with the young stranger, and led him around and introduced to him such as would be eligible acquaintances, for Captain Bass was but thirty, and a prime good fellow, who liked to see everybody social with everybody.

While they were making the rounds, three men were standing apart from the main crowd, somewhat, and engaged in watching narrowly the young sharpshooter, upon whom nearly all eyes were levelled in admiration.

But the eyes of these three men emitted only glances of suspicion and hatred; evidently the Boy Sharpshooter was not a stranger to them.

One of the trio was Jacob Toleman, the father of the young bully. He was a little, dried-up, villainous-looking man, with ill-attendance to his personal habiliments, and a furrowed, evil countenance that spoke but too strongly of excessive drink.

The second of the trio was Omerhaun, the gunsmith, who manufactured or repaired firearms in his smithy, which was situated in a dark, gloomy gorge, not far to the west of the Settlement.

Boover Legree, the third of the party, was, at a glance, a first-water border

ruffian, bristling with weapons, dark, wolfish-looking, brawny—one of the heavy villains, sometimes so admirably represented on our principal theatre stages.

"The kid's the very image of your man, Toleman," Legree said, with an oath.

"I dunno," replied Toleman, dubiously. "Mebbe you're right, but I can't see much resemblance."

"But the gun gives him away, I tell ye," put in Omerhaun. "I made thet plating an' put et on thet gun, five years ago, when we war in Kentucky. Don't ye suppose I've got eyes, ye fool?"

"Well, suppose that is Walter Wagner's kid—what then?"

"Sure enough—what?" sneered Legree, biting fiercely at his brigandish black moustache. "If the young feller inherits a whit of Wild Walt's dare-devil disposition, he'd be a hard customer to attack."

"Ye'r' right, Boover. Wild Walt war wuss ner any painter; an' I kin see a dozen p'int's o' our old capt'in in thet young galoot yonder. Jest ye watch him more, will ye? He's ready ter jump out o' his hide inter a fight, under a minnit's notice."

"Yes, he has undoubtedly been trained by Wild Walt, and knows his P's and Q's. D'ye s'pose he recognized us?"

"No! He war ter young, an' then we've all changed our titles since five years ago. But I'll bet thet boy war sent heer on our trail. Wild Walt'll never forget thet past."

"O' course not. We must blot et fer him, tho'!" replied Toleman, grimly. "Ten thousand in gold ain't ter be sneezed at."

"I'd like ter sneeze at et, ef 'twould put et inter my coffers!" averred Legree. "The boy's got to be tumbled over, or we're no good."

"I've a plan worth a dozen o' yourn!" Toleman, senior, said, digging with his fingers among the roots of his hair, in a speculative way.

"You notice about the feller, yonder, a slight resemblance, in form, to the outlaw, Tiger Track?"

Both Legree and the gunsmith started, and gazed at Gold Rifle, who was now standing conversing with Capt. Joe Bass.

"Thar is some resemblance in figger," assented Legree.

"An' Tiger Track's face, ye know, is allus behind a mask. What else d'ye want ter make an outlaw out o' the boy, yonder?"

"Humph! you old rascal, what ye plumbin' after?"

"I'll illustrate," replied Toleman, with an evil smile. "Ye see, that cuss yonder

may's well be put out o' ther way, as we couldn't make him tell whar Wild Walt is, no more'n we ked a grindstun. Therefore, et's our line duty ter put him whar he'll be an angel, instead uv an enemy. I'll get Jay, my son, to accuse him o' being Tiger Track, and by joinin' in the testimony, we kin soon hev him higher'n Haman. See? Then we'll buy his carcass, tie et ter thet hoss o' his, an' thet hoss'll natterally pull fer thet retreat o' thet lad, as I ken see et's a smart animal. We'll foller thet trail, an' in thet way mebbe come across Wild Walt?"

"A darned good plan!" assented Legree.

Awhile later, the Boy Sharpshooter, Gold Rifle, was still conversing with Captain Bass, when the two Tolemans, Omerhaun, and Boover Legree suddenly approached, and stopping in front of him, Jay Toleman cried:

"Ha! ha! Mr. Gold Rifle, yer jig's up, fer we four hev recognized you as the cuss who attacked us with a dozen outlaws down on Sleighton creek last winter. You are Tiger Track, the outlaw."

"You lie like a thief!" replied Gold Rifle, greatly surprised at the accusation. "My name is Kit Wagner, and I come from beyond the Clay Bottom Stream!"

"Bah! ye ken't lie ter us, you whelp!" here interposed Legree. "We know ye, an' yer jig's up. Fellers, grab thet cuss, ef ye'r' after wantin' Tiger Track, the outlaw and trapper's foe!"

Words like these acted like magic upon the honest but much-abused trapping element.

They came forward, grim and threatening, backed by the soldiers.

But quickness here proved superior to force.

With a muttered ejaculation, Gold Rifle sprang upon his white mustang, which stood close by, and swinging his rifle right and left, regardless as to whom he hit, he dashed furiously down through the parting crowd, and over the southern snow-covered prairie, toward the distant fort.

A yell of rage escaped the Tolemans and their friends, and running to their stacked guns the soldiery possessed themselves of them, and sent a storm of lead after the daring sharpshooter.

He was by this time on a line with the turkey stool, and though none of the bullets struck him, his horse was hard hit, and dropped dead beneath him.

Pausing only long enough to take some papers from his saddle-bags, the fugitive kept on over the snow-covered prairie at a rapid speed, nearly equal to that which his

horse had made, for there was a crust formed over the snow sufficient to bear up under his weight, which was indeed fortunate for the fugitive.

Without looking behind him, Gold Rifle ran on for some distance, as fast as his legs could carry him. Perhaps ten minutes elapsed, and then he paused and looked around. He was in a shallow valley or depression in the prairie, and had stopped at the edge of a dark motte of blasted pine timber.

From his position he was unable to look back upon the Settlement and shooting-ground, because of the intervention of the swell he had descended.

While he was standing thus, a man with an axe on his shoulder came tramping out of the wood.

"Hello! Gracious! who're you?" was the salutation. "What's the matter, stranger?"

"Oh, nothing of much account," Gold Rifle replied. "I'm trying to dodge a pack of fools who are labouring under the delusion that I am Tiger Track, the outlaw. Was just considering which way I'd best go."

"Ye don't say so? Waal now, that's tew bad, I swow to breeches. I 'tarnally hate ter see one feller set onter by a big passel o' roughs, for 'tain't right. S'pose ye'd like ter find a hidin'-place from them chaps w'at's arter ye, eh?"

"Yes, and I must be moving," replied Gold Rifle. "Although I'm not Tiger Track, I do not want them fellows to get hold of me. Good-bye."

"But hold up, stranger. Two heads ar' better'n one, ef one on 'em's empty. Jest ye tote yer carcass along after me. Ain't often I kin do a feller a good turn, an' I allus improve sech chances. Cum along, now, without a word, an' I'll show ye a coop so safe that ye'll be surprised. Ye see I'm a man o' character, an' I ain't half so green as I look, tho' I am fresh frum Vermont."

And it occurred to the keen eye of Gold Rifle that he did look most ridiculously "green," for he was clear-quill, old-school Yankee, from his boots to the top of his head, a distance of some six feet and four or five inches.

He was at a glance a powerful man, but so awkward and unwieldy as to create a belief that he could be easily handled. But this belief would have gradually died out to an observant eye.

And as he followed trustingly in the Yankee's footsteps, Gold Rifle could but smile at the apparent clumsiness of the great fellow.

"Dunno much about you, stranger," the words came next, "but I reckon ye ain't so bad, or ye'd show et in yer countenance. My name's Josh Hemperhill. Ye remember the Hemperhills war a great family up in Vermont, no doubt—great men, every mother's son of 'em—men of sound moral an' manly *character*, sir! Ye kin find their autobiographies anywhar in thet State. Bein' ther last male o' ther family, ther hull avalanche o' manly character nater'ly descends onter me. None o' ther Hemperhills war afraid ter work—could chop wood an' drink hard cider from morn till night an' never squeel, I tell ye. An' as a man o' character, et behooves me ter foller in their footsteps; so I kim out heer an' hired out ter General Maynard for ten dollars a year an' my board. General's a 'tarnal good feller, but when ye cum ter his darter, I swow she's jest old peaches! Ruther sweet on me, too, fer she allus tells me she admires character in a man. But, cuss darn it, ther old general went an' hired an Irishman, an' he s tryin' ter cut around Miss May wi' his gibberish; but I'm solid in my b'lief thet she won't sacrifice good healthy character fer an Irish hod-carrier."

"Of oourse not," declared Gold Rifle, barely repressing a laugh at the Yankee's earnestness.

Josh talked an incessant flow of nonsense as he led the way rapidly through the motte and ascended to the prairie on the other side of the shallow valley.

On rising to the level prairie again, Gold Rifle looked back toward the Settlement, and saw that he was pursued, as he had surmised.

A score of the trappers had joined the now mounted soldiers, and all hands were now descending the slope into the valley.

"We shall have to run for it, Josh!" the sharpshooter said, "or those fellows will catch up with us."

"No, they won't; but we'll run, as it's yet two miles to the general's."

Perseveringly the two men kept on, with a mile between them and the pursuers, and at last they bounded into the yard that surrounded the general's house.

And the pursuers still came on.

CHAPTER III

DELIVER, OR DOWN GOES YOUR SHANTY

"HERE we are, stranger, at General Maynard's, an' a gosh-darned fine feller the general is, too. Clean essence from his fore-

fathers, an' as squar' a feller as ever chawed his cud. Bet my character ag'in' ther best bushel o' potatoes as ever grow'd, thet ther general wull give you a warm welcome, but ye see I ken't jest say how't'll be with Miss May, fer she's cl'ar gone sweet over me, an' hain't got an eye-winker fer any other feller, 'less et ar' thet dratted Irisher. Now, ef I befriend ye, like a man of character should, stranger, ye're not to stick yer finger inter my pie, ner luk sweet at her, ner try ter coax her arter ye, ner any conducements likely ter disturb my future prospects."

"You need have no fear of me, Josh," replied Gold Rifle, smiling. "I don't think I shall be likely ter interrupt ther harmony of your courtship. Lead ahead."

Josh accordingly led the way up the front steps of the elegant farm-house, and into a spacious hall, which in grandeur was beyond anything Gold Rifle had ever seen.

The walls and ceiling were beautifully decorated, and the floor carpeted richly, and furnished with mirror, bat-rack and coat-case.

Josh led on, and they entered a grand parlour, where a cheery fire was blazing brightly, and casting forth a moderate warmth.

A young lady was sitting at a piano, idly drumming the keys with her white fingers, while an old, white haired, white-bearded man was ensconced in a great cushioned arm-chair near the fire, engaged in perusing a paper.

He was probably among the sixties in age, but a fine-looking man withal—firm, erect of carriage, and large of build—one born to command.

He was attired in the costume of a General of the Regular Army, and near at hand a sword was hanging unsheathed, which looked as if it had seen a good many hard battles.

The young lady at the piano was the person whom the eyes of Gold Rifle centred upon, after he had given General Maynard a searching glance.

She was about eighteen years of age and surpassingly pretty.

Both General Maynard and his daughter looked up in surprise as Gold Rifle and the eccentric Josh Hemperhill entered the room. But both exhibited their courtesy when Josh had introduced his young charge.

"General an' Miss May, this 'ere's a chap they call Gold Rifle, as ye mought jedge frum his gun hyar. I found him in a fix, pursued by ther sojers o' your command, an' all ther trappers an' roughs this side o' Dakoty line, an' bein' a man of solid basis character—a trail w'ich descended frum old Nebuchad-

nezzar Hemperhill, who died in fifteen hundred an' forty—I fetched him along wi' ther insurance o' perfection. Why, sir, thet same lad, he tells me, stud on his head and shot a turkey ter-day."

General Maynard bowed, and gazed at Gold Rifle keenly.

"Your name—what is it, young man?" he asked, his tones kindly yet stern. "What is this Josh is telling?"

"My name is Kit Wagner, sir," the Boy Sharpshooter replied, "though I am more generally called Gold Rifle, after my gun, here. As to what your man here has said, it is mainly true. I have been and am now pursued by those who participated in to-day's turkey shoot, at the Settlement. Because I won the last turkey it seems a feeling of enmity was created against me; and a young fellow of about my own age, whom they called Toleman, accused me of being Tiger Track, the outlaw. His assertion was confirmed by a quartette or so of his pals, and to save being lynched by the crowd I had to make a dash for liberty. Back here apiece I met your man, and he insisted upon my coming here. But I think I had not best trouble you. If I go at once, I may succeed in outwitting the pursuers, yet."

"Then you deny that you are Tiger Track, the outlaw?"

"Most assuredly I do. I never heard the name of Tiger Track until a couple of days since. My home is beyond the Clay Bottom Stream, and I am a stranger, hereabouts."

"You say your name is Wagner, sir?"

"Yes, sir."

"I had a friend by that name, years ago. Now, young man, I hardly know what to say for you, for I see your pursuers are coming hotly toward the house; and they are angry, too, for many indignities have been heaped upon both soldiers and trappers by Tiger Track and his outlaws. I don't believe they'll accept any explanation from even me, and it will be necessary for you to try your luck at escaping."

"But, believing you to be what you represent, I shall not let you go without friendly assistance. May, my dear, you may take this young gentleman to the Secret Corral, and give him a choice of the horses. Josh, you may remain with me, and we will keep the rabble out of the house as long as possible."

Gold Rifle arose to follow May Maynard, but first turned to the general, a suspicion of moisture in his eyes.

"You are a good and noble man, sir," he said, shaking the extended hand warmly,

"and if it ever comes within my power to do you a good turn, believe me I shall improve the chance. I thank you all for the interest you have taken in me, and maybe it won't be long ere I can repay you."

The pursuing trappers and soldiers had by this time come up and drawn rein in front of the farm-house, and knowing what was required of him, General Maynard stepped out upon the veranda, followed by Josh.

All the soldiers, except Captain Bass, were drawn up in line, while the rest of the party, composed mainly of trappers and traders, were scattered about, presenting rather a warlike spectacle. Captain Bass, unable to restrain his men, rode forward and joined Josh and the general on the veranda.

"Order, here!" Maynard cried, a fire in his eye, and the true military ring still in his tone. "What means this disorder among you privates?"

"It means that we're after an outlaw and thief—the ruffian Tiger Track, and he's in your ranch!" replied Lieutenant Grey, a bitter outlaw-hater, who was leading the military in the place of Captain Joe Bass who had refused to act against Gold Rifle, whom he believed to be an honest man.

"Order!" again thundered the general. "'Tis false, the charge you prefer against the young man. He is no more Tiger Track than I am, and I command you to withdraw immediately to the fort."

"But we decline!" retorted Lieutenant Grey, with a sneer. "If you'll cover a traitor, general, we won't, and we're just the boys as is going to stretch up Tiger Track to the handiest tree."

"You cannot have the lad—he is not here!" said the general, seeing that it was useless to argue with so many insubordinate spirits.

"You lie!" replied Grey, fiercely. "You are a traitor to your country, yourself, and you'll deliver up the boy, or we'll tumble down your shanty."

"I have not got the young man about my premises," declared the general. "Any three of you are welcome to come in and search!"

"We won't come a step, you old cuss!" shouted the lieutenant, drawing a pistol. "Deliver, or down goes yer shanty!"

"I'll deliver nothing!" replied Maynard. "You are at liberty to come and search, for by this time your intended victim is far away."

And turning on his heel the veteran officer re-entered the house.

With an oath of rage, Grey raised his

weapon to fire at the retreating form, but before he could pull the fatal trigger, there was a sharp report, and a bullet from Josh Hemperhill's revolver dropped the would-be assassin dead.

A cheer of approval went up from the soldiers at the brave act, and motioning to Joe Bass to head them, they turned upon the Tolemans and the other traders, and drove them off at the point of their bayonets.

This ended what might have been a serious mob.

In the meantime May Maynard had led the way out of the parlour, into a kitchen, and down a steep pair of stairs into a deep cellar.

Here she paused, and searching around for a few moments, produced a candle from a shelf, and lighted it. By its illumination Gold Rifle was enabled to see his surroundings, and all he beheld were the heavily-planked walls of the cellar.

"Humph! I see no way of escape from this hole," he said.

"Because you are not in the secret," May Maynard replied, with one of her pleasant little laughs. "Here"—and she led the way to one side of the cellar. "Please push heavily against these two planks."

Gold Rifle did so, and to his surprise they fell back, leaving an aperture of considerable size. Through this he went, according to May's orders, she following and closing up the hole.

They were now in a dark underground passage, about eight feet by eight in width and height.

They soon arrived at a point in the passage where it was vastly wider, and here several handsome horses were feeding, attended by an Indian groom.

May made hurried explanations to the young savage, and then giving Gold Rifle a warm pressure of the hand and bidding him God-speed, she hurried back toward her home above the earth, while the young man selected a fine steed from the corral, and mounting, rode on through the wonderful avenue of escape, until he suddenly rounded a bend and rode out from behind a rock that hid the outlet of the passage, into the light and freedom of a little prairie valley.

CHAPTER IV

LEGREE SHOWS HIS CLOVEN-FOOT "CHARACTER"

UNDER the charge of the soldiers the trappers and traders must perforce retreat,

and they were driven quite back to the Settlement ere they were left unmolested, and the soldiers withdrew toward the fort.

By this time most of the trappers had come to disbelieve the story of Gold Rifle's being Tiger Track, but there were still a few left who accepted the word of the Tolemans for it.

Two days passed by in the snow-bound northwest.

The weather was biting cold, and the snow still remained upon the oceanlike savannas, a winding-sheet for nature. The winter had set in, in dead earnest, to all appearances, and it was to be a severe one.

Very few hunters or trappers ventured far beyond their respective shelters, and matters on the plains were temporarily at a standstill.

Only Jay Toleman had summoned up courage to venture forth into the wilderness of snow, giving as his reason that he had a "gang" of traps out, upon the South Fork, which must be looked after.

On the second day after Christmas, the border-ruffian trader, Boover Legree, mounted his horse, and rode down over the heavy crust to General Maynard's.

He often made it a part of his business to call at the farm-house and chat with the pretty May Maynard, although his visits were ever unwelcome to the general and his daughter.

But, as he had never shown any of his villainous or disagreeable nature in their presence, and was as polite and gentlemanly as could be expected, his visits had been tolerated, for, being an influential man upon the border, the general was not desirous of crossing him.

To-day, one of the keenest, frostiest of the prevailing cold snap, the trader found May Maynard alone in the cosy parlour, the general having ridden over to the fort, on business.

May wheeled around with a little scream, as she heard his heavy tread, her face grown suddenly pale.

"Oh, Mr. Legree, is it you? You frightened me by your abrupt coming."

"Eh? frightened ye, my dove?" the trader said, softly, as he took a seat near the piano. "I got lonesome up at the Settlement, and so ventured down here, where it is pleasant. Besides, I have a mission of mercy to fulfil. Ha! ha! Ye remember that feller we war after Christmas—ther one wi' the Gold Rifle?"

"Yes! yes! What of him?" May demanded eagerly. "I was just thinking of him when you came in, wondering if——"

"If what?"

"Oh, no matter what! What you have to say of him, please say quickly, for I shall have to excuse myself from entertaining any one to-day."

"Well, 'tain't much I've got ter say o' ther chap," Legree replied, carelessly.

"Ye see how it was. He got shot afore he kim in hayr, an' he's layin' at ther precipice o' death now in my old trappin' cabin up on ther Clay Bottom Stream. He's give up ther ghost, and sent me fer ter tell ye, as he wants ye ter come; and so forth, and so forth!"

"What! Gold Rifle dying, and asking for me, Mr. Legree?" May exclaimed, in great agitation. "Impossible!"

"'Tain't impossible, no sech a thing, my lady. I jest cum frum there, only stoppin' fer a minnit at the Settlement. He hes bin callin' fer you fer over half a day, sayin' as how he had an important secret ter confide ter ye."

"Where is this cabin? Could you direct me to it?"

"No, fer ye'd soon get lost in ther wilderness of snow. But, ef you'll accept my escort, I'll soon have you at ther boyee's bedside."

May arose from her seat and paced to and fro across the soft carpet a few moments in greatest perplexity of mind. She was half-inclined to believe that Legree was lying to her—that his story was only an invention by which to entice her away from home into his villainous toils.

Her father had often warned her of him, and bade her not to trust him in the slightest, and as she thought of these warnings, she resolved to resist, and not believe his story.

"If only on Christmas day you were Gold Rifle's bitter enemy, how comes it that you are sent by him on this mission?" she asked, stopping short, and gazing sharply at the trader.

Legree flushed, and shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Why—why you see——" he began; then stopped as he caught the stern glance of May's eyes.

"Enough!" she said, with a contemptuous laugh. "Do not imperil the future of your soul by lying any further. I know your little game, now, Legree. Gold Rifle is no doubt in safe quarters, ere this, and as for your deliberate lie it has utterly failed. We have been warned that you would show your cloven foot, and it has now come forth. There, Boover Legree, is the door through which you came. You will please take your departure through it."

"No, my pretty dove, I'll do nothing of the kind at present!" the trader replied, with a frightful leer. "Since you've found me out, partly, we may as well become better acquainted. When I leave this 'ere ranch, I'm goin' ter fetch you along with me!"

"Don't you dare to lay a hand on me, villain. I am in my father's house, and I command you to leave instantly, or I will call the servants, and have you forcibly ejected."

"Ha! ha! ha!" and Legree laughed loudly—"that's pretty well done, Miss Maynard. Your vocation should be that of an actress. Why, to my own knowledge, you do not keep servants other than that Yankee, Hemperhill, who is as green as a cabbage-leaf, and a raw Irishman who knows enough to get up hash, and that's all. Do you for one moment imagine that I have the least fear of them? If so, you are mistaken. I can lick both of them at a time."

"Then, shure, an' ye'll be doin' what ye niver did before!" exclaimed a voice, and the Irish cook, Pat Dolan, stepped into the parlour, with a grin of delight at an anticipated fray. "Allow me ter interdooce meself to yez, Mister Legree—I'm Patrick Dolan, lately from the ould counthry—sacred be its name."

Legree started to his feet with an oath, as he beheld a brawny individual, fully as heavy as himself, and a man evidently of true grit.

"You see I am not unprotected, you ruffian!" May cried, triumphantly. "Dolan will fight for me!"

"Arrah! an' it's yerself as spakes the swate truth now!" assured Pat.

And flourishing a club in his hand, the impetuous son of the Emerald Isle sprang toward Legree, who was evidently waiting for him.

But the club was of no use, for in a moment the two men were in a bearlike hug, waltzing here and there over the carpet, Pat endeavouring to work the trader out into the hall and thence out of doors.

But Legree was a man of great strength, and he bent all his energy in trying to crush his adversary.

Pat, however, was made like iron, and all the efforts of the trader were for a time unavailing.

Around and round, twisting and squirming, the two men went for several moments; then Legree by a dextrous movement jerked away his left hand and dealt Pat a blow in the forehead that felled him to the floor. Then the ruffian, with an oath, sprang toward May, who had retreated in affright.

"Now, you little tigress, I'll have you without——"

"A doubt!" finished a voice, and the trader was suddenly confronted by the stalwart form of Josh Hemperhill, and a pair of cocked revolvers.

"Without a doubt, Mister Legree. Oh! ye needn't look—et's me, ef I am as green as a cabbage-leaf. Now, sir, you git, or I swow ter breeches ef I don't sock et ter you fer kill. I ain't a-foolin', nuther, so you git!"

With a frightful oath Legree turned and walked out into the hall, an expression of malignant hate upon his countenance.

"Remember, May Maynard, I am not through with you, yet, nor you either, you accursed Yank!" he cried, as he left the house, mounted his horse, and rode away.

Josh returned to the parlour and found Dolan just crawling to his feet, with a wry expression of countenance.

"The bla'guard—the spalpeen—where is he?" was the demand.

"I put him out, Pat, darned ef I didn't! Jest as easy as chawin' cheese. Ye're a good fighter, Pat, but thar's one essential ye sadly lack, an' that's good solid basis character!"

CHAPTER V

INTO THE WILDERNESS

For several days after Legree's ejection from the Maynard farm-house, things moved along in their own channel.

Little was done outside of the old general's quarters, for he was a humane man, and not the one to cause either man or beast to labour out in the bitter cold and freezing weather which prevailed.

So that during this time of little-to-do, eccentric, uncouth Josh Hemperhill had plenty to occupy his time within the farm-house, for he paid Miss May the strictest attention, and in his own way tried hard to make a successful courting. Also, he was busied in keeping a weather-eye upon his rival, the Irishman, lest he should plant a seed of fascination in the eye of Miss Maynard.

And so it happened that the two men-servants were quite a bore to poor May, whose maiden tastes and ideas took quite another channel from them, and, although she had not the heart to offend by resisting the ridiculous protestations of Josh's love, or the little gallantries of Pat Dolan, she was often thoroughly disgusted with them.

In one of these unenviable frames of mind, she applied to her father, the white-haired old general, for relief.

"Well, well, my dearie," the old man said with a smile; "I don't know what you are to do, I am sure, unless you send Josh away for a while, on some pretext or other: for I do not wish to offend the poor fellow, he having done me several good turns."

"Very well; I'll send Josh away then," May replied, brightening up and hurrying away toward the servants' quarters. "I'm sure it would be a great relief to me to escape his ardour. And then, I have just a capital idea how to dispose of him, and kill two birds with one stone."

The day being a moderate one, with a smiling sun, she resolved to have Josh start at once, and hunted him up in the pantry, where he was innocently engaged in stowing away a half of one of Pat's New Year mince pies with evident huge delight to think that he was "hitting one" at the "blarsted Irish."

Calling him one side, with a roguish glitter of fun in the expression of her hazel eyes, May approached him on her proposed plan.

"Josh, you have quite a notion of liking me, haven't you?"

"Eh? why, bless your heart, yes, Miss May. I swow to gracious ef ye didn't cum near takin' the breath cl'ar away frum me."

"That is because you were appropriating Dolan's pies, Josh, which is very wrong. How would you like to have *me* make pies for you to eat, Josh?"

"Oh! Jerusalem! *wouldn't* that be O.K.?" and the Yankee's face lighted up with a beaming grin. "You don't mean it fer sart'in, do ye, Miss May?"

"Why shouldn't I, Josh? You're a great good fellow, and ought to have all the pies you could eat. You know the Fourth of July isn't a great way off."

"Fact, by Jimminy. Hedn't loked that fer ahead, yet."

"And the glorious Fourth is an auspicious day for celebration of the nuptials of a happy pair, Josh?"

"Hey—how's that, Miss May?"

"I say, the Fourth of July, is a happy occasion for one to get spliced."

"Whew! Jewhaker Jewsharps, yes! Yer solider than a brick there, Miss May!"

"Yes, and I see you appreciate my candour, Josh. Not many young ladies would exchange all these little confidences, but I believe that you'd do almost anything for me, as you seem to love me—and—and——"

"So I do—so I would, Miss May."

"Well, Josh, will you promise to do me a favour? You remember the young fellow you brought here—Gold Rifle?"

"Yes, I reckon. What o' him?"

"Well, I want you to go and hunt him up, and deliver to him a note which I shall give you. You may have to be absent a week, or even a month, before you find him; but after that you can have a whole winter to yourself in his company. With your weapons you can supply yourself with food, and have jolly sport."

"Yes, Miss May; but sence I've got a hankerin' arter you, I kinder hate ter go away."

"Pooh! Don't be a baby now, or I shall say you've lost your character, Josh."

"Then I'll go, Miss May, darned if I won't! W'en ye sling a shot at my character, like ther Hemperhills of the olden time, I'm on my muscle."

So it was arranged that Josh should depart at once, and he was furnished with a fine equipment, consisting of a fur-trimmed suit of buckskin, a Sharpe's army rifle, pistols, knife, hatchet, snow-shoes and cooking utensils, and by the time he was ready to start, he had a horse-load of traps.

Then, mounting his horse, Josh bade a sorrowful adieu to the farm-house, and its occupants, all except Pat, to whom he gave a parting scowl, and set out over the white prairie into the western wilderness.

Knowing that not enough snow had fallen since Christmas to obliterate a trail, Josh decided to repair to the little valley in which Gold Rifle had debouched from the secret passage, and here there were chances that he could strike a trail that would eventually bring him up to the sharpshooter.

After about a half-hour's ride he descended into the valley in question, and found a faint horse trail sure enough, leading from the vicinity of the passage along the valley to the westward.

"That's Gold Rifle's trail, kerect," Josh muttered, running his eye along the valley, "but the next thing ar' ter foller it. Ef it doan't play out, I'll swow ef I don't foller it, an' overtake Mr. Gold Rifle in a jiffy."

Following the course of the valley for a couple of hours, Josh then ascended to the level prairie, still directed by the snow trail. This he followed as rapidly as possible, and just at dusk sighted a motte of cottonwood timber ahead, which promised shelter for the night.

He was considerably fatigued, and without thought of danger, he rode briskly forward and entered the woodland, where but little snow had fallen upon the ground, although the branches and boughs were heavily laden with the flakes.

Dismounting in a well-protected spot,

the Yankee turned his horse at liberty, and began making preparations for an evening camp-fire, when he was suddenly and rudely interrupted.

There was a chorus of savage yells, and he was quickly seized, thrown to the earth, and bound hand and foot. As quickly as he could collect his scattered senses, he looked around, and discovered that he was in the power of a band of red-skins, some twenty in number, who wore war-paint upon their faces, and were of a savage, repulsive aspect.

Moreover, Josh saw by their head-dress, and the fancy carving upon their cheeks, that they were braves of the Sioux nation.

Without offering any verbal explanation, the red-skins dragged their victim along through the woodland by the heels, taking extra pains to take all the stones and stubs in their path. At last they reached a temporary Indian encampment of seven lodges, and Josh was placed, under guard, by a roaring camp-fire.

In the course of an hour he was visited by a large, portly chief, accompanied by nearly the whole camp. The chief was well known to the Yankee, for he had once participated in a hunt for the big warrior of the Sioux nation; and this chief was *Sitting Bull*.

"Wagh! Sitting Bull has seen the white Yankee before," the chief said, a sudden wave of recognition passing over his grim countenance, so horrible in its decorative paint. "He chased the Sioux warriors from the fort, ere the snows of winter made the plains white. Sitting Bull does not forget."

"No, ye're darned right!" Josh retorted, with a grin, as he thought of the mentioned occasion.

"Ye're durned right, old Chair-bottomer. An' now thet ye've got me, I calkylate ye'll be after skulpin' me, or roastin' me?"

"No! Sitting Bull has even a better sport for his warriors. A wild young buffalo bull has been captured, and shall take the Yankee toward the setting sun. Sitting Bull has said it."

A long lariat was fastened about Josh's feet, and he was again dragged through the timber—this time to where the western side of the motte met the prairie.

Here the lariat was fastened to the hind legs of an untamed bull, and Josh was ready for rapid transit. Only about ten yards of rope intervened between him and the heels of the bull, and things promised to be mutually interesting.

The whole encampment of sayages had

by this time gathered upon the prairie, and at a signal from Sitting Bull, there was a wild chorus of savage screeches, and the young bull gave a snarl of terror, and plunged madly away into the night, out over a boundless expanse of prairie, and dragging poor Josh ruthlessly along in the rear.

CHAPTER VI

HUNTING THE BLACK RANCH

ON over the wintry plain plunged the terrified young buffalo, with snorts and bellows, and at every bound of the strong young animal poor Josh was jerked along, at a terrible speed—now on his back and then on his belly, in and out of hollows, over hummocks, and through bushes—it seemed that his infuriated war-horse would never stop.

In vain he endeavoured to sit up long enough to grasp the rope with his hands, which were now free, but each time he was jerked back, and subject to the agony of his wild ride. It was fortunate that the snow-crust covered most of the rough spots over which they went, or he could not have retained his consciousness, during the first ten minutes of his journey. But, despite the snow, his clothes were torn and his skin blistered.

The motte island encampment of Sitting Bull and his warriors was left far behind, and the buffalo was heading due westward toward a long line of timber that grew upon the shores of the Little Adder.

Although it was a dark night, the ground-work of white had the effect to make objects at a considerable distance visible to the naked eye; hence, Josh discovered their approach to the timber when they were yet some distance away, and was now assailed with double fears for his personal safety.

Of course, should the bull attempt to pass through the timber, all hope of his escaping alive was lost; to be dragged along through the timber would be almost instant death.

Nearer and nearer to the timber they approached, and Josh's hair began to stand on end at the prospect ahead of him, when there was a sharp, ringing rifle report, a bellow of pain, and the bull went crashing forward to the ground.

The impetus of the fall nearly jerked the wits out of Josh, but he soon recovered to find the buffalo floundering in death-throes at his feet.

With his unloosened hands he soon had his feet at liberty, and rose to gaze around him.

He was not a hundred yards from the edge of the timber, and yet he could see nothing of the whereabouts of any person from whom the death-shot might have come. The bullet had struck the buffalo in the lower part of the neck, and penetrated to the heart.

"Waal, I'm ther luckiest cuss afoot, darn my socks ef I ain't!" Josh muttered, finding that his strong Sharpe's army rifle was still lashed to his back, and his belt weapons all intact.

Suddenly a handsome form loomed up through the darkness.

"Hello! I'll be jugged ef et ain't the Yankee, Josh!" said the newcomer.

And no less a personage than Gold Rifle advanced to the side of the dead bull.

"Yes, an' yer thet Gold Rifle chap I'm huntin' fer!" cried Josh, with a broad grin of delight. "How d'ye do, anyhow? I'm as tickled ter see ye as I would be ter see my hoss, w'ich I left back heer in ther hands of old Sittin' Bull."

"Ah! then it is to the red-skins you owe this ride, eh? and a smile illuminated Gold Rifle's face. "I thought so, when I heard you coming. I knew Sitting Bull was somewhere around on the plains, but was ignorant of his exact whereabouts. But, whatever brought you out here so far from the fort?"

"Jest in search for you!" Josh grunted, with a scowl, as he thought of May Maynard and the Irishman. "Ye see, Miss May sent me fer ter fetch ye a letter."

"Well, come along to my camp in yonder wood, and let me have it."

They soon arrived at Gold Rifle's camp, which was pitched in under the shelter of the timber, and contiguous to the bank of a medium-sized stream known as the Little Adder. A fire was burning brightly within a lodge of buffalo-skins, and it was a welcome sight to half-frozen Josh.

"Here we are!" Gold Rifle cried, as they entered the cheery lodge where was warmth and the odour of cooking meat. "Now give me the letter from Miss Maynard, and you can warm and repair damages."

The note was penned in a delicate, graceful hand, and ran as follows, with the heading of date, place, etc.:

"MR. WAGNER:

"DEAR SIR:—I send you this note by our man-servant, Josh Hemperhill, with the request that he will deliver it safely to

you. In it I wish to make myself so bold as to extend you an invitation to a social gathering which will take place at our quarters on the 16th of January, that being the eighteenth anniversary of my birth. Your presence would be a source of much pleasure to father and myself. Josh you can keep with you until you pay us the desired visit. Very truly yours,

"MAY MAYNARD."

A flush of joy stole over Gold Rifle's face as he perused the above—joy because of the honour conferred upon him by the Maynards, and because he was given the opportunity to call upon and form a more thorough acquaintance with pretty May than had thus far been his privilege.

"I'll go!" was his instant resolve, "and have a good time. If between now and then I cannot clear myself of being Tiger Track, it is curious. I have the whole thing pretty well seasoned for cooking already."

"Waal!" growled Josh, as the young sharpshooter slipped the note into his pocket—"what did my gal write ter ye, Cap.?"

"She give an invitation to a birthday gathering, Josh, the sixteenth of next month. To-morrow is the first—New Year's. And I mean to make the moments count, too."

"Ye don't say?—an' did she put in any kisses or luv poetry fer me?"

"Nary, Josh! She said you was to remain with me, until I get ready to go back to the general's. So now, you've got to follow the trail I lead, for the next two weeks."

"All right. I'm ther chap as kin do it, ef I do say so. I swow ter breeches ef I don't believe I could outwalk ye!"

"I haven't the least doubt of it, Josh. But we won't try. Now, then, it is necessary that you should know my business, as we are to be together. Look at this, and you will understand my calling here upon the prairies"; and pulling aside a strip of the fur with which his buckskin suit was ornamented, the firelight glanced upon a plate badge of solid gold, with a star in the centre, and an inscription on the plate, in beautiful design, which read:

U.S. GOVERNMENT.

TO

C. A. WAGNER,

In recognition of faithful services
as a detective spy.

Upon the other edge was an inscriptive date—"March, 187—"

"Waal, by gosh, ef ye ain't one o' them detective chaps!" Josh exclaimed, in astonishment. "Who'd ever 'a' thought it?"

"Yes, I am a detective," Gold Rifle confessed, "and my business here is to break up Tiger Track's outlaw band, and clean out a certain nest of deviltry known as the Black Ranch—the stronghold of this same Tiger Track, by the way."

"Phew! ye don't say so! Neow, why didn't ye show yer cullers ter them galoots as war after ye, ther other day?"

"That was because I did not care to have my business publicly known. When I do, I shall apply to General Maynard for co-operation in exterminating the gang. I believe there were men among those that chased me, who are members of Tiger Track's band."

"Ye don't say so! Waal! waal! an' what are ye goin' ter do, now, since you've added in a man like me, o' solid duplex basis character?"

"I am hunting for this Black Ranch. Very few upon the Dakota frontier know where it is, yet many strange stories are told of it, and the mysteries about it. It is said to be somewhere upon these prairies, but that a man might look for it a lifetime and not stumble upon it. Yet, I believe that I am upon the trail of it, and hope to find it, ere long. You can accompany me, and may be of some aid."

The evening meal of roasted deer-meat was now served up, and both Josh and the young detective did it ample justice. The fire was then replenished with fuel, and they turned in for the night.

Early on the following morning they were astir, and after eating what was left from the evening meal, Gold Rifle furnished two mustangs from a bough-shed, in the timber, and both he and Josh mounted and set off, Gold Rifle in the lead.

He headed their course, after leaving the timber, due north, and rode rapidly, the crust holding up beneath the strokes of the animals' feet. Josh followed close behind, for, although he was large, awkward and clumsy, he was by no means a poor horse-man, as Gold Rifle saw at once.

The afternoon wore away toward darkness; the sun sank to a level with the ocean of white, and away to the north, on the crest of a prairie billow a dark speck grew visible to the searching gaze of the two horsemen. At first it was no larger than a pea; then it grew steadily until it had assumed and was gradually assuming larger proportions, the further they advanced to-

ward it. In half an hour they were near enough to define a great barnlike edifice upon the towering crest of a distant prairie billow, surrounded by a high fence of plank.

And Gold Rifle gave vent to a shout of joy, and drew rein as he beheld all this, motioning Josh to stop, also.

"That's the Black Ranch and stronghold of Tiger Track, undoubtedly," he said, "and that is all we want to know at present. The next thing is to find a hiding-place, for I'm satisfied we'll have a chance to fight outlaws, soon!"

CHAPTER VII

A BOY IN CAMP

UPON the day following Gold Rifle's discovery of the Black Ranch upon the prairie, an Indian pony made its way to the Settlement, and came to a halt on the village square. It was not riderless, for a boy of some six or seven years, well wrapped up in furs, was seated astride of the saddle.

One by one the villagers were attracted to the spot, and gathered around the lad with the greatest curiosity. At a glance the waif did not belong either at the fort or Settlement, yet here he was, alone and unaccompanied; and from whence did he come?

He was fat and chubby for his age, with a stolid boyish face, a firm-set mouth, peculiar to see in one so young, and eyes as black as coal, and having the sparkle of the diamond.

He did not appear to be frightened, as gradually a crowd gathered around him, but, rather, seemed to watch the men with interest, singling out, with the wonderful intuition of childhood, the faces that were good and those which were evil.

At first the villagers were at a loss what to do, but finally an old trapper broke the ice by approaching the little stranger, and beginning a series of questions.

"Well, my little man, who are you?" was the first interrogative.

"I'm Jack!" was the reply, without any show of bashfulness; and, too, it was apparent, that the little fellow was intelligent beyond his age.

"Jack, eh! Well, what else—Jack what?"

"Dunno!" was the reply.

"Don't know where you live, do you?"

"Yes, I do—at the Black Ranch. Mamma is there—b'en very sick but gettin' better. Mamma's a very nice woman."

"Of course, you little man, but what is your mamma's *name*?"

"Dunno; *fordot* mamma's name."

"That's too bad. You say your mamma's at the Black Ranch? What kind of a place is that?"

"Great awful big house with high fence around!" exclaimed Master Jack, raising his hands high aloft to signify how big he meant, but could not explain.

"Ha! what is this, you little cuss?" cried a gruff voice, and Jacob Toleman pushed forward, excitedly.

"Hell and furies! How'd you ever get this far away from home?" and the ruffian trader laid a heavy hand upon the waif's arm, and he began to cry in affright.

"Hold! stop there, Jacob Toleman!" cried an authoritative voice, and General Maynard rode forward. "Get away, you villain, or I'll have you arrested and put in irons. What right have you to lay hands on that boy?"

"The right of a protector and guardian—the right of a grandfather!" retorted the trader, defiantly. "The little devil has wandered away from home, and I'll see that he goes back in a hurry."

"Then you have to do with the outlaw's Black Ranch, eh?" demanded the general, sternly.

"No! the brat never saw the Black Ranch nor any one else. It is all a cussed lie about there being such a place."

"Oh! I dare say you know all about it. But we will not trust to your testimony in this case. Step aside, sir, and let me question the lad!"

At first Toleman hesitated, and was inclined to disobey, but the drawing of the general's sword had the effect to make him retire. The general then rode closer to the winter-waif.

"Your name is Jack, eh, little fellow?"

"Yes, sir."

"And your mamma's name——"

"Dunno; *fordot*."

"She is a prisoner in the Black Ranch?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know this man?" pointing out the elder Toleman.

"Yes. He bad man! He comes and say very bad, wicked words to mamma, dat make her cry."

"Ha! and is there any one else here among this crowd whom you have seen at the Black Ranch?"

"No!" replied the boy, after a glance around. "Tiger Track he's very bad to mamma, so she git Injun to send me off here. I fought o' mamma's name, now. It is Mamma Mabel!"

General Maynard started violently in his saddle, and gazed eagerly at the boy.

"Mabel! Mabel! my God, can it be possible!" General Maynard muttered, running his hand across his eyes. "Gentlemen"—turning to the curious crowd, "I believe that I am on the eve of a discovery that will enlighten me concerning a lost one who has been dead to me for the last ten years. I therefore claim the right to this boy, until I learn more definitely what I wish to know. Are you willing I shall take him with me?"

"Ay! ay!" was the rousing shout in concert, for the general was highly respected by the large share of the settlers. "The boy is yours."

"And, my men, I may call upon you to assist in attacking this unknown nest of the outlaws, the Black Ranch. Can I rely upon your aid?"

"Ay! ay! general!" was the eager response. "We're with you, heart and soul."

Then General Maynard rode away toward his farm-house, leading the horse which bore Master Jack by his side.

When they arrived at the farm-house, little Jack was taken to the parlour, where May gave him a loving welcome, and before an hour had passed he was quite at home, although he occasionally mentioned "mamma," which showed that she, whoever she was, had a deep hold upon his childish affection.

Nothing was said on the subject to the boy, but May and the general had a long talk about her and the Black Ranch.

"It is undoubtedly my Mabel," the old man said, bowing his head in his hands, "who has been lost to me these twenty years. Poor Mabel! to think that she is languishing in a barbarous prison, when she might be here, a comfort to my declining years."

"And who is this Mabel?" May Maynard asked, with interest. "You never told me of her heretofore."

"Because I did not wish to bring up the past. May, you little know all the disgrace I have suffered in my younger years, and I may as well give you a brief of the story, to-day. Mabel was my first and *only* daughter. Don't start, my dear, for I will explain about you, by and by. Mabel, as I said, was my first daughter and also my only child by marriage. Her mother died upon giving birth to her, and Mabel was placed under the charge of a competent nurse.

"During the succeeding seventeen years, I must confess that I was little with my child; war, together with a multitude of

other matters, kept me away for a most part of the time. Yet I had a handsome home on the Hudson, which I had inherited, and was able to rear my child in luxury and give her all the advantages of education. At the age of seventeen she was the belle of her social circle, and I began to entertain hopes of her making an eligible match.

"About this time I saw a chance for gigantic speculations in Western railroads, and disposing of all my Eastern property, moved away to this country. And it was the curse of my life, for in three short months I had no daughter, she having secretly wedded a man of questionable character, and had fled. I heard afterwards that he became the chief of a band of robbers. For the recovery of my child I searched and toiled until the outbreak of the great war between the North and the South; then having nothing to deter me, I rejoined the army and fought until victory was ours, and I had attained the honours of generalship, which, thank God, I never disgraced. Just a year or two before the war I took you—adopted you as my own child, from the death-bed of a gallant old officer of the regular army, and have reared you under my name, as you were such an exact image of what my Mabel once was. Your real name is May Faulkland, but you are welcome to mine own, until you make a choice of a husband, and may God grant that your choice be crowned with success."

"Yes, dear papa; but do you believe it possible that the Mabel of whom this little boy speaks, can be your long-lost daughter?"

"Yes, May, I do candidly believe that the prisoner of the Black Ranch, and my long-lost Mabel are the same. Indeed, the child, yonder, bears a striking resemblance to Mabel, as she looked when last I saw her."

"And, do you know, papa, there is another, whose features resemble those in yonder portrait—which is of your lost daughter, is it not?"

"Yes, that is a correct portrait of Mabel; and to what other do you refer?"

"To the young man who was flying to escape the mob, on Christmas—Gold Rifle."

"Ha! is that so? I did not notice, I am sure."

"Well, what do you propose to do in this case, believing that Mabel is indeed alive and in the mysterious Black Ranch?"

"Do? why, I shall organize a company out of the trappers and hangers-on at the Settlement, and start to the rescue at once. And, while I think of it, 'twould be a good plan to start at once, while Master Jack's horse's trail remains distinct. No doubt by

it, and the little fellow's direction—for he is observant and as keen as a razor—we can find the den of outlaws without much trouble. And then we must *take it!*"

"Oh! 'twould be glorious fun, papa!" May cried, with a zest. "I should love to be along. Can I go, please—can I? I can dress up in my male hunting costume, and you know that I'm a capital shot. May I go?"

"Yes, child, even though it may be to instant death, for I fear to leave you here alone and unprotected, with two such heartless wretches hovering at the Settlement, as Jacob Toleman and Boover Legree. Yes, get your outfit in readiness, at once, for I shall start as soon as I can ride back to the Settlement and equip my men."

Then the general arose and left the parlour, to order his horse, and May also hastened to her room to prepare for her expedition into the wilderness.

First of all she provided herself with and donned a semi-male hunting-suit of buckskin, which had done her service in many a prairie tournament, before, and fitted her to perfection. Then she armed herself with a Sharpe's mid-range rifle, and revolvers and knife.

Her horse, a handsome bay animal, was then brought around by Pat Dolan, and the saddle-bags equipped with a good stack of cold meats and other provision for the coming campaign.

By the time all this was accomplished, the general arrived at the farm-house with twenty men whom he had enlisted in his service at the Settlement.

They were mostly trappers and fur-traders, a rough, but kindly-disposed band.

At last everything was in readiness, and with the white-haired old general in the lead, and May by his side, leading the horse of little Master Jack, the cavalcade set off over the snow-crust toward the Black Ranch—for General Maynard had secured the services of an old trapper who had seen the famous outlaws' den, and was confident he could guide the party to it without trouble.

CHAPTER VIII

GOLD RIFLE'S DARING VENTURE

FROM the Black Ranch it would have been comparatively an easy matter to have detected the two horsemen as they stopped in full view upon a crest of white. Gold Rifle was well aware of this, and having but

little doubt that their rash advance had already been discovered, he knew it would be necessary to hunt a place of refuge; hence his words at the conclusion of a late chapter.

Glancing sharply around he sought and found a place which he knew would better answer their purpose, in case of an attack, than the open prairie. It was a small motte of a few scattering cottonwoods, which grew around a buffalo wallow; yet it commanded a view on all sides, and was the best cover to be had in the vicinity.

Turning their horses' heads while they were conversing, they rode away to the motte, and dismounted. Here the ground was less covered with snow, and with easily extemporized shovels of bark they soon had a large space cleared to earth on which to build a fire and camp. This operation piled the snow up around them so as to quite hide their camp, and kept off the sharp cutting wind.

Gold Rifle had in his saddle-bags a piece of raw venison yet, large enough to last for a couple of meals, and they concluded to use this first, and reserve their other provender for the future.

Leaving Josh to prepare the evening meal, Gold Rifle left their snow fortifications, and scouted about the camp.

He could find no signs of enemies in the neighbourhood, nor were there any signs of approaching outlaws from the ranch. This was a relief to the young sharpshooter, for he had no desire to fight against odds of twenty to one.

In the direction of the Black Ranch all was quiet; evidently the outlaws had not discovered their approach.

Scouting through to the western side of the motte, the young detective made another important discovery, namely—the existence of a deep, sluggish stream of water.

It was now frozen over, with a glassy-like surface, caused by an overflow and freeze. Gold Rifle came to the conclusion that the stream ran in its northerly branch not far from the site of the Black Ranch, for along both edges of the valley grew fringes of a species of sage-bush, and these he could see a long way in the direction of the ranch.

Returning to camp he found Josh ready to serve up their meal, and while they partook of the venison, he related his discovery of the stream.

"I believe it's the only way I can approach any nearer to the outlaws' nest than I am now," he said, thoughtfully, "for to go over the prairie is certain discovery.

Luckily, I am provided with a pair of good skates, and if the stream goes by within gunshot of the ranch, I'm bound to get that near, anyhow."

Darkness was by this time enshrouding the earth, and Gold Rifle determined to cover the distance between him and the Black Ranch while it lasted.

Looking carefully to the condition of his rifle and revolvers, he bade Josh adieu, and, leaving the camp, paused long enough to affix to his boots a handsome pair of regulation skates, and then he darted rapidly away over the glassy surface of the river like a bird.

The course of the river was very tortuous and deceptive, and it soon became apparent to the young detective that to reach the ranch he must accomplish about twice the distance that would have been necessary, had he gone overland.

In two hours' time he concluded he must be in close proximity to the ranch, and accordingly slackened his speed, finally coming to a halt.

With his skates still fastened to his feet, he left the ice, and cautiously ascended so that his face was on a level with the prairie. He gazed around. It was a dark, moonless night, yet he was able to distinguish objects at a considerable distance, the snow lighting up the ground, dimly.

The Black Ranch now lay to the northeast of him several miles, but by the line of bushes which fringed the valley, he saw what he had before surmised—that the stream and valley wound close to the ranch on the northern side, but just how close he was yet unable to determine.

Going back to the river, he resumed his journey on the ice, making strangely weird music with his ringing skates.

The remaining distance he accomplished in another half hour without much exertion, and found himself in an abrupt bend in the course of the stream, just around which was the Black Ranch, in close proximity to the banks. The high plank fence, in fact, ran out to the very edge of the bank, and only the upper part of the ranch could be seen over its top.

After he had brought himself as near as he dare, without exposing himself, he sat down and took off his skates, and secreted them in the butt of a hollow log which ended up through the ice. Wrapping his precious rifle in oil-cloth he also secreted it in among the bushes, reserving for use only his revolvers and knife, for in close quarters he knew these would answer his purpose better than a rifle.

His next move was to creep stealthily up among the fringe of hen-sage, and, lying low, make observations.

All about the place was deepest quiet.

Then he crept from his concealment rapidly over the snow toward the fence.

After listening to assure himself that no one had been disturbed by his coming, Gold Rifle sat down and took off his boots and hid them in the snow where to find them again, for at present time of action their crunching on to the crust was dangerous. As a substitute to protect his feet from the cold, he drew upon his feet heavy fur moccasins, which were among the mysterious contents of his haversack.

He was then ready for business, and, first of all, made a tour of inspection around the mighty fence, stopping now and then and endeavouring to peer between the cracks, without avail. The darkness inside preventing his seeing anything of the interior.

Upon the southern side he found two ponderous gates, made like the fence of heavy plank, and barred on the inside. Here, evidently, was the only entrance and exit of the ranch.

Here, also, Gold Rifle saw the fresh imprint of horses' hoofs, showing that some one had recently entered the yard from off the prairie.

Going all around the ranch, he arrived at the spot he had started from, and throwing off his outer, or hunting, jacket, he set silently and noiselessly to work.

With his stout hunting-knife, he cut out in square cakes a large space of snow-crust, taking care to work under the dark shadow of the fence.

These cakes he made about two feet square, and when pried out they had a solid thickness of about five inches, and were all a person would care to carry. After cutting over a hundred of these, a task which occupied fully an hour, he carried them close to the fence, and began piling them up in order of a stairs, until he had elevated them so that by standing on the last step he could just peer over the top of the fence.

In two minutes after the completion of his novel snow-stairs, he had drawn himself up on the top of the fence, and giving a hurried glance, he dropped lightly down into the yard—and into the grasp of half a dozen men who had all the time been crouching in a black shadow.

In vain the young detective fought to free himself from the iron grasp upon him, and to get at one of his revolvers. But he might as well have tried to raise the earth.

He was borne down upon the snow, and bound securely, hand and foot, and then carried between four brawny outlaws into the Black Ranch, which was a monster building, roughly constructed, and repellent in its midnight colour. In through a series of halls and entries, and then finally the captors halted in the centre of a long, wide apartment, furnished only with rude settees.

Gold Rifle was placed on one of these, and allowed the privilege of sitting up.

The room was brilliantly lighted with chandeliers containing lamps, and the young detective had a chance to see who his captors were.

One he remembered of having seen at the Christmas turkey shoot, and heard addressed as Jacob Toleman—one of the foremost in denouncing Gold Rifle as the outlaw, Tiger Track.

The others were masked, but that they were some of the trader's pals there could be no doubt.

The trader advanced now, a devilish expression of jubilation upon his face.

"Ha! ha! you young hawk, you didn't escape us so nice, after all, did ye?" he leered. "You put yourself in our man-trap neatly. Now then, I don't intend ter spend much breath over ye, but I've got a few questions ter ask ye. Ye're Wild Walt Wagner's kid—that we know. Now then, whar's yer dad?"

"Find out and you'll know!" retorted Gold Rifle. "I'll not tell ye."

"All right; we won't urge you. Search him, boys, and then cast him into the pit without bonds. He can't never git out—that's bin proven."

A hurried search of Gold Rifle's clothing was accordingly made, and an old letter found and handed to Jacob Toleman. He tore it open and perused it eagerly, his villainous countenance assuming a more diabolical expression. When he had finished he said:

"It's a couple of months old, but here's what it says:

"DEAR SON:—When this reaches you I shall have left our mountain home, and taken the gold to a safer hiding-place. On my return I have a great mission to perform—this is to rescue your dear mother and my wife from captivity. Only yesterday I got an inkling that she whom we have so long mourned as dead is living and a prisoner in Tiger Track's stronghold. If you can do anything, do it quickly, for our mutual sake.
YOUR FATHER."

"So ye thought you'd come and search for yer mother, did ye, boy? Well, we're goin' ter give ye a chance among the human skeletons as will keep you company in the pit. D'ye know where Wild Walt is?"

"No! I wouldn't tell if I did!" returned Gold Rifle, indignantly. "He'll be the death of you yet."

No more was said; the four men pounced upon him, and though he struggled with all his power, they bore him to a well-like opening in the centre of the floor and pitched him over into it head-foremost.

Down—down—down went the young sharpshooter into the black depths, and the four ruffians turned away with horrible chuckles, as though the work were nothing unusual to them—a sort of by-play to pass away time.

CHAPTER IX

IN THE EARTH

WHEN Gold Rifle found himself going down head-foremost into the pit of darkness, he felt sure that he was going to his death, yet had the presence of mind to make a desperate attempt to turn over, so that he would strike upon his feet.

Whether or not he succeeded he never knew; all he realized was a terrible jar, then a blank came, and he knew no more.

How long he lay in this condition of course he could not tell, but at last there came an awakening.

He opened his eyes. Everything that had passed came clearly to him, and in a second he knew that he had been cast into the pit beneath the ranch.

For many minutes he lay perfectly quiet, fearful to move lest that act should bring to him the discovery that some limb had been broken or misplaced. He could feel no soreness as he lay upon the ground, and after awhile came to the conclusion that he was not hurt at all, and with an effort rose to his feet.

He now found that he had sustained no injuries otherwise than a severe shock which had made his lower limbs rather stiff, and that he was still better than half a dozen dead men.

He stood for many minutes at loss what to do. Around him all was Stygian gloom.

He was in a hole, deep down in the bowels of the earth, which was intended as his tomb.

That others had died here was plainly evidenced by the terrible stench that prevailed—a deathly, sickening odour of decaying bodies.

"Ugh!" he muttered, half-fearing to stir; "this is about ther worst dose of perfume I ever got. What's to be did? that's the question before ther Investigatin' Committee. A feller can't remain long in this stench and live; and as long's I'm hull-boned yet, I ain't a-going to say die. The first requisite is a light, and I have the very article of production in my coat-sleeve pocket, which is handier than a pocket in a shirt. Glad them chaps were kind enough to leave my hands and feet free."

Bending over, he fumbled in his capacious right coat-sleeve, which contained a leathern pocket, and soon produced a half of a sperm candle and some matches. One of these he struck upon his sleeve and then ignited the candle, and had a bright light, which illuminated the bottom of the pit with startling distinctness.

What he saw was but evidence of what he had been given reason to expect. He was in a tomb, deep down in the bowels of the earth—a place of the dead rather than the living. All around were strewn skeletons, skulls and half-decayed corpses; close at hand lay a body that apparently had not yet entered into decomposition—that of a man past forty years of age.

At one side of the pit was a deep hole in the bottom, with a body half-dragged into it, and close at hand lay a shovel and a pick.

And to Gold Rifle this was next to a reprieve, for he knew in an instant that the pick and shovel meant life and liberty to him.

Sticking the candle into a thumb-denture in the wall, he seized the shovel and began rolling the decayed bodies into the grave. At last the job was finished; every corpse, or evidence thereof, was rolled into the grave, and the dirt piled copiously upon them.

As a natural result, the stench in the pit became less and less offensive, and in half an hour the atmosphere below was quite breathable.

His candle was burning low, and having but one more in his pocket, he knew that he must needs get to work toward escaping.

He had already formed his plans; for his hands and brains had each been busy. He would cut a spiral stairway of steps around the pit, from the bottom to the top! He had faith in his success to work out his fully-formed plan, by aid of the shovel and his hunting-knife—for, strange to say, the outlaws had not deprived him of his weapons.

With all his strength he worked away, throwing the soft dirt into the bottom of the pit, and thereby effectually shutting out the

scent of the dead bodies. By the time his candle was half-spent, he had two circles of his staircase completed, and was about half-way up from the bottom of the pit.

Believing by the state of his stomach that it must be noon, he paused long enough to partake of the scraps of venison which were in his haversack. He then went on digging resolutely, and worked until he found that he must yield to exhaustion, and rest. He accordingly ceased his work, and digging out a deep hole in the dirt, ensconced himself in it, and went off into a sound, refreshing sleep, first, however, blowing out his candle.

When he awoke a couple of hours later, he felt greatly refreshed and strengthened, and set to work again. For two hours he laboured, and then, when he was within ten feet of the opening into the room above, his candle wholly expired.

But this was not so great a disappointment now, as sufficient light for his purpose came down from above. Right here he dug out, in addition to his staircase, a large, deep cavity in the earth siding of the pit, in what he concluded was the northern side. He spent several hours in its construction, for he meant that it should be large enough so that *two* persons could move about handily.

Two persons—for with remarkable daring his formed plans now included the rescue of his mother, and escape by way of this very pit!

After he had completed the little cave he proceeded to complete his staircase, working carefully, and with as little noise as possible, for there was now danger of being overheard by the outlaws, should any of them chance to be in the room overhead.

Finishing the last step necessary, he returned to his little cave, ten feet below, and sat down to rest and listen. From here almost everything going on in the room overhead could be distinctly heard.

Some time elapsed before Gold Rifle heard any sound; then came the tramp of heavy-booted feet, and a man peered over into the pit, with a strange, hollow laugh. Directly afterwards the lights in the room were turned low, and Gold Rifle heard the fellow tramp away.

"Humph!" he muttered, "I guess the coast is clear now, and I can go up safely. Reckon that chap was a guard, and it will be my duty to silence him if he gets in my way."

Leaving the shovel in the cave, and arranging his knife and revolvers in a convenient position, the young detective set out on his daring venture. By the power of his strong young arms he drew himself up

out of the pit into the room. He was now free in one sense—free from imprisonment in that deep, darksome earth-dungeon.

Gliding into one corner of the room where the shadows were the thickest, he crouched down upon one of the rude settees and waited. He had as yet not fixed upon any plan of immediate action, but he could not remain long undiscovered. Indeed, he now heard the clumsy-footed guard coming back, with muttered curses upon some object which he had dropped.

"Ken't be I drapped it inter ther pit!" he growled, tramping into the room, and approaching the black hole in the floor. "Wouldn't 'a' lost that plug o' terbaccy fer a counterfeit dollar."

"Halt! One move or a word and you die!" came a low command, accompanied by the click, click of a revolver lock.

The guard obeyed with a muttered curse. He dare not disobey, when he felt the cold muzzle of a revolver touch the back of his neck.

With the strong deer-thong straps which he always carried in his pocket, Gold Rifle securely bound the ruffian's hands behind him, and then wheeled him around so that they faced each other.

"There ye are, my man!" he said, with a chuckle, "taken a prisoner just as nice as you please. Couldn't have done it better yourself, could you?—There! take care you don't speak loud, or I'll send you where they have brimstone hash for board. Now, then, since you're my prisoner, I have a perfect right to subject you to a rigorous course of questioning which may not be at all to your liking, but which you must swallow and digest as you would a sugar-coated pill."

"And also you must answer every question, and if you don't, and go a-tryin' ter yell, or talk loud to attract attention, or any dodge games, down goes your shanty into that pit o' the dead, like a double-distilled thunderbolt! D'ye hear?"

The man assented by a nod of his head. He knew it wasn't his trump flop, yet.

CHAPTER X

A CAPTURE AND ESCAPE INTO THE CAVE

"WELL, then," continued Gold Rifle, gliding away, and closing the door which the guard had left open, and also turning on a greater power of light from the lamps, "the first question I shall ask you is what is your name? Answer in a low, prompt tone, and you'll not be harmed."

"My name's Mose Renfrau?" was the sullen response.

"Mose Renfrau, eh? Do you belong to Tiger Track's outlaws?"

"No—I belong to Gang 2."

"What's that?"

"The gang w'at works inside. The outlaws ar' No. 1, and hev nothin' ter do wi' us fellers."

"Oh! that's the lay-out is it? You're a guard then?"

"Yes. I have charge of the whole building—a beat through every hall to see that all is right."

"Do you ever enter the rooms?"

"Ov course; I hev ter give ther signal and they let me in."

"What is the signal?"

"Go find out—I'll not tell ye."

"You won't, eh?" Gold Rifle reminded, seizing him and forcing him forward toward the hole of the pit—"then down ye go, end over end."

The fellow's face assumed a white, scared look as he was confronted by the yawning abyss, and he trembled in every limb.

"Yes! yes! I'll tell," he gasped, his teeth chattering, "only don't shove me down in that grave. What is it you want to know?"

"The signal you spoke of."

"Well, it is five successive light raps upon the door. One feller never speaks ter er-nuther, durin' workin' hours."

Gold Rifle gazed at the guard sharply, to see if he was lying, but he was evidently not, judging from his countenance. But, one thing did not escape the lynx eyes of the young detective—a ragged edge of hide where the hair and beard met above the ear.

"See here!" he exclaimed grimly, "you ain't ther chap ye seem at all. What means this?" and with his hands he jerked off first a long, false beard, and then a wig of hair.

"What kind of a crooked game are ye tryin' ter play, anyhow?"

The man swore roundly in French, and his eyes looked like balls of fire. Shorn of his hirsute possessions, he appeared a man of thirty-five, smooth-faced, and the very photograph of all that was evil.

"You may as well out with it," said Gold Rifle, "for I know that you are not here without an object. You are under disguise, and have some plan afoot, or you would not be here. Needn't be afraid to tell me, for I'm a detective, and don't want anything more to do with you than can be helped. What are you here for, you rascal?"

"To kill Tiger Track, the outlaw!" re-

plied the man, fiercely. "I have been here a year for that purpose, and still Tiger Track lives."

"What wrong has he ever done you?"

"Ruined my wife, and afterwards murdered her to get rid of her. Do you not think I ought to hate him?"

"I should say Yes. And now, are we to be friends or enemies? You evidently care nothing for the band, except to accomplish your object; I am here to rescue my mother who has long been a prisoner in Tiger Track's power. You can let me have your place as guard until I get her free, and then assume this disguise again for your own plans."

"Correct; but where will I stay during all that time?"

"Down in the pit. The dead are all far under the ground and there is no smell. You can remain there, and I will lower you down provisions. If a day goes by without your hearing from me, you can come up by aid of a stairway I have cut into the earth. You will find your trappings in this room."

They talked at considerable length, and after giving Gold Rifle all the information possible, Renfrau consented to be lowered into the pit, on condition that Gold Rifle would not forget the food. This the young detective promised, and, procuring a long, stout rope, he lowered the Frenchman into the pit.

He then donned the wig and false beard, after which he closely resembled the man whose place he was usurping. The first round he made of the beat he was watchful and ready for defence, should his assumption be detected. He passed several men in the long halls of the ranch, but none of them paid the least attention to him.

After making half a dozen rounds, according to Renfrau's directions, he repaired to the cook-room and got his morning meal, which consisted of venison and corn-dodgers, for which he had a strong relish. So strong, in fact, that he managed to store away five of the dodgers in his pockets.

These he dropped down to Renfrau on his return to the audience-room.

A day and a night passed, and still Gold Rifle remained on guard duty.

Although he had been nearly all through the ranch he had not stumbled upon the room which contained the imprisoned Agnes Wagner, his long-lost mother.

But there was one discovery he had made—one which no one outside the outlaw-clique had ever suspected.

The Black Ranch was in reality a counterfeiter's den, where base coin was manufactured and finished for the market.

The counterfeiters only worked at the dead of night—from eleven o'clock until day-dawn; then the counterfeiting-rooms were locked up, and the men, some eighteen or twenty in number, scattered to their various rooms throughout the building.

Gold Rifle also learned that a squad of ten men constantly acted as pickets in the yard outside of the building, and a man kept watch in the tower.

And he saw that it would be next to impossible for him to escape, unless it was as he had designed, by tunnelling out under the ranch.

This he resolved to do, as soon as possible after finding his prize, the imprisoned Agnes Wagner.

For the day following he had no occupation, and in these hours, when there was no danger of their being discovered, both he and Renfrau worked at the tunnel, for the Frenchman saw that it might serve him as an avenue of escape, after he had completed his meditated vengeance on Tiger Track.

About six o'clock in the evening Gold Rifle resumed his guard duty, but Renfrau kept on digging.

In one of his rounds through the halls on the second floor of the ranch, the young detective heard a groan, and approaching close to the door nearest him, he paused and listened. There were voices inside, engaged in conversation. It was evidently a man and a woman, and the man was speaking in the unmistakable tones of Jacob Toleman.

"There! there! shet up yer blubbering, woman, over thet brat o' ourn. Et cum ter the Settlement, an' I had it brained, as I told you I would, ef you ever tried any games to escape. I reckon ye'll find out after awhile thet I'm *master*! When I stole ye away from Alf King, or Boover Legree, as he's now known, I thort I war gettin' a lamb, 'ca'se ye allers appeared so while ye war Wild Walt's wife; but I soon found the difference!"

With a horrible laugh the ruffian turned, and Gold Rifle heard him coming toward the door.

He stepped to one side, an expression of grim determination upon his face, his eyes gleaming forth the pent-up anger that was in his breast.

"I'll baste the inhuman beast one rap," he muttered, seizing a hickory walking-stick, which stood near. "If I can't drop him, I've got a knife to finish him with,

aside from as noisy a pair of revolvers as ever cracked. I dare not use them here, however."

Nearer the ruffian came, and Gold Rifle seized his stick firmly.

There was much depending, now, and he resolved to be the victor when he had the chance. The key turned in the lock, the door opened, and the elder Toleman, or Dolph Carew, as the prisoner had called him, stepped out into the hall.

Then came a whiz and a whack of the club, and without even a groan the old ruffian dropped to the floor.

Gold Rifle did not pause to see if he was seriously hurt or not, but seizing him by the heels, dragged him back into the room occupied by the prisoner.

"Come!" he said, turning to her and beholding a pale, sickly-looking woman of eight-and-thirty years. "If you would escape from this living death, come with me, for I am your son, come to rescue you, my long-lost mother!" And he advanced toward her with outstretched arms.

"My son!" she gasped, rising toward him, her eyes shining gloriously with a new-born hope; "my God, can this be true, or am I going mad—mad—mad?"

"You are not wrong, dear mother!" the young detective replied, kissing her tenderly, "for if you are Agnes Wagner, the wife of Wild Walt, I am your son, whom you have not seen since he was a little boy. But come, dear mother, we must not tarry here, for you probably well know the men who surround us!"

He hastily gathered up a bundle of wraps and clothing, which caught his eye, and then led the way out into the hall, locking the door after them. Then they cautiously descended the stairs, and made their way through a labyrinth of halls, most luckily not encountering any one of the enemy.

On reaching the pit-room, Gold Rifle by Renfrau's assistance, succeeded in getting Mrs. Wagner safely down into the little cave in the side of the pit; then Gold Rifle went to the cook-room and succeeded in capturing a large haunch of venison, already roasted for the morrow's meals.

This he took down into the little cave, and then Renfrau received back his disguise and went on guard duty above, the same as at first, promising to warn the young detective in case of danger.

After slicing up the venison, and secreting it about his person, Gold Rifle set desperately at work in tunnelling toward the river-shore, which Renfrau had already well started!

CHAPTER XI

ON THE ICE AND A RACE FOR LIFE

DETERMINED now was Gold Rifle to escape, for he had a dear mother to care for, and he worked away with a will.

The dirt was now light and loamy, being so near the surface, and he made rapid headway. When it was about morning, he ceased his labours for a few moments, and with Mrs. Wagner partook of some of the venison he had captured.

He then went at it again, and by noon he concluded by a gurgling sound just in front of him, that he was almost through. So he paused, and went back to the little cave in the dirt, at the commencement of the tunnel, where he had left his mother. He found the guard, Renfrau, here, also, waiting anxiously to know the result of the labour.

"I guess I'm nearly through," Gold Rifle answered, to his inquiry, "but whether I shall come out above or under the ice, I do not yet know. I shall not break out until darkness again. How is it outside?"

"Sharp and clear, with moonless nights. You'll get off, easy enough, an' I wish ye God-speed, an' the leddy too."

The guard then took his departure, and Gold Rifle and his mother waited anxiously for the coming of darkness.

During the time intervening, they found much to say to each other, and Mrs. Wagner was greatly overjoyed to learn that her husband was alive and somewhere in the West. The knowledge was consoling to her.

The afternoon passed quickly, and when by his watch he knew it was growing dark, Gold Rifle led the way into the tunnel, and on reaching the spot where he had left off digging, he set to work to break through the remaining dirt.

It was an easy matter, for a few shovelfuls of dirt only were taken out, ere a dull light shone in. In five minutes he had the hole large enough to admit of their egress, and they breathed the pure air of freedom.

Before them stretched the night and a snowy wilderness.

"You will remain, please, while I skulk around the neighbourhood and get my boots and rifle, which I left outside the fence ere I attempted to enter the ranch and got caught. I won't be long."

So saying, Gold Rifle crept from the hole out into the open air, and along in the shadow of the creek bank.

Stealthily he crept along the bank several yards, and then came upon his rifle, securely hidden in the sage bushes.

Leaving it, he crawled along over the snow toward the fence, near where he had scaled it, for it was here he had buried his boots. It was a daring venture, but he was aware that he must have them, in order to escape. Inch by inch he crept along, expecting every minute to get a challenge, or a bullet in his brain.

But luck was with him, and without evident discovery he found and pulled on his boots. He was about to retreat, when his eye caught sight of an object close at hand, and his heart gave a jump when he saw that it was a medium-sized frame handled, with a lasso attached.

It had evidently been left there by some ranch hand; yet, it occurred to Gold Rifle, might it not be a decoy? It was just the very thing he wanted to draw his mother upon, still he hesitated and lay upon the snow, watching with the eyes of a lynx.

"Reckon a feller can't more'n try, anyhow!" he muttered, at last, "an' ef I am discovered, I calculate wi' my skates on I kin outrun 'em."

Creeping forward he grasped the lariat and began creeping hastily toward the river, pulling the sled behind him. Without accident he reached the ice, and securing his rifle and skates, he advanced along up to the hole. Here he found Mrs. Wagner awaiting anxiously.

"Had you any trouble?"

"No, but I opine we'd better be gittin' out of this, lively. 'Twon't be long before there'll be a rumpus in the enemy's camp. You get on the sled, while I am putting on these skates, and we'll soon be off."

"Hark! listen! a shout!" exclaimed Mrs. Wagner, breathlessly, pointing into the hole. Quickly Gold Rifle sprang to the opening, and listened for a repetition.

It came booming along through the tunnel, a moment later, in a hoarse, deep voice—the voice of the guardsman, Renfrau:

"Fly! fly! they've discovered yer flight—look out fer 'em, a good seven dozen strong. Fly!"

"As I expected!" Gold Rifle muttered, with a grim contraction of his brows. "We've got to git, in shape."

He finished buckling on his skates, then placing Mrs. Wagner upon the sled, he wrapped her warmly in the blankets he had fetched from the ranch.

Every minute now seemed an hour until they should get started.

"Now hang on!" he said, and seizing the lariat he started down over the ice, drawing the sled behind him.

He set his teeth hard together, and darted on over the smooth surface like a flying bird, never pausing once to look back or around him. Not until he was approaching near to the bend; then he came to a halt.

"What is the matter?" inquired Mrs. Wagner, anxiously. "Is there danger?"

"Yes, to advance further on the river. A whole gang of the outlaws are concealed around a bend down yonder, and we shall have to leave the ice."

He was not long in making the decision, but pulled the sled up on to the strong snow-crust on the western side of the river.

"You had better let me get off and walk," said Mrs. Wagner, anxiously. "I have considerable strength on occasions like this."

"No, no; you sit still. I can make better time drawing you than if you were to walk. The crust holds up perfectly under my skates, and I shall keep them on."

It was too dark to see anything of the enemy, so he set out over the prairie at a brisk speed, the stiff crust answering nearly the same purpose as the ice for skating.

For several hours he toiled on, pulling his precious prize behind him, determined to keep a-going as long as his strength held out.

But at last he was obliged to succumb to fatigue, and came to a halt in a small belt of timber on the top of a prairie crest.

"I'm goin' to stop here till daylight, anyhow," he said, puffing and panting from his over-exertions. "I don't reckon the devils will get my trail before that time. We must have come fully eight miles from the river, if not more."

He did not build a fire, although the night was cold, for this would be certain to attract his enemies to the spot, but wrapping all the blankets snugly around poor Mrs. Wagner, he threw himself flat upon the crust, face downwards, and went off into a sound sleep, trusting to his instinct to arouse him in case of danger.

Gold Rifle slept on undisturbedly until close upon day-dawn, when he awoke ready for the day's labour, come it in what shape it might.

Arousing his mother, who had not suffered much from the cold, he gave her some of the venison he had fetched along, and they both satisfied the craving of their appetites.

"We will wait a little longer, till the darkness entirely clears away, for I want to get a view of the surrounding prairie," Gold Rifle said.

The darkness cleared away rapidly now, and the light of a clear, crisp day dawned over the snow wilderness. And the sight that was presented to the view of Gold Rifle was little more than he expected.

The outlaws were at the spot where he had left the ice, some five miles to the eastward, and were just starting out upon his trail. He saw this much, by aid of his glass; but he also made a discovery that was in a degree encouraging.

There were but about a score of the pursuers, all told. The remainder of the outlaw gang had, evidently taken another course.

"Can you see the Black Ranch, my dear?" Mrs. Wagner asked, coming out to the edge of the timber, where Gold Rifle was standing.

"One corner of its roof—no! it's the tower of the ranch, 'way off yonder. The remainder of the place is hidden behind a prairie swell, greater than this. But come; we must not tarry here, but must recommence the race."

Mrs. Wagner again resumed her position upon the sled, and seizing the lariat, Gold Rifle set out briskly to the westward.

No halt was made, but he pushed determinedly on toward a high mountain peak which loomed up before them in the distance, looking like a giant spectre in its sheet of pure white.

"There's a cave half-way up that mountain-side, if I remember!" the young detective said, as they advanced. "If we can get in the cave, we'll be all right, and can fight off the varmints until they git sick."

But in the course of a half-hour, a new change appeared. The heavens suddenly became overcast with a dull grey colour, and snow began to fall fast and thick, every flake counting, being as large nearly as a nickel. Evidently a severe storm was at hand.

A stern expression came over Gold Rifle's features; and Mrs. Wagner noticed it at once.

"What is it?" she questioned. "Will not this snow cover up our trail?"

"Yes, and us, too, unless we strike cover inside of two hours," was the disquieting reply. "Et's goin' ter be an old snorter, such as ye read about!"

He increased his walk to a run and kept on, while the white flakes came down in dense clouds, covering them perfectly white.

On—on, resolutely yet doubtingly, and at last they arrived at the foothills of the mountains, but to their disappointment not a tree was there to offer them shelter. And the snow came down faster and faster; it

had already fallen to the depth of a foot, and still no signs of cessation.

"Get off and let me assist you!" Gold Rifle said; "we shall have to try and hunt up the cave, up in the mountain-side, or perish in the snow!"

They began the steep, rocky ascent, which was nearly perpendicular, and gained an altitude of fifty feet or more; then stopped with white, scared faces, as they heard a strange humming, rushing roar above them—something awful in its import.

"My God, we are in the path of an *avalanche*!" Gold Rifle exclaimed.

CHAPTER XII

ON THE PRAIRIE

THE man whom General Maynard had engaged as guide into the Black Ranch country was in many respects an "odd 'un" on the side of human character. He was evidently along in the 'forties, strong and muscularly built, with a quick, sharp glance for every new object, and a habitual watchfulness about himself, lest he should be stricken by an enemy, or should betray himself.

He gave his name to General Maynard as Old Steuben, and by this title he was made known to the whole party.

After leaving the farm-house the cavalcade struck into a sharp gallop and headed due westward into the pure white of the snow-bound West.

Old Steuben rode on in advance, grimly silent and uncommunicative, except when questioned.

They travelled along swiftly in the afternoon's sunlight, making a picturesque sight as they trailed over the white winding-sheet of the prairie.

About sundown they came in sight of a "prairie island," or motte of timber, several miles ahead, and General Maynard signalled to the scout, who approached respectfully.

"You see the timber ahead, scout—would that not form us an admirable camping-ground for the night?"

"Yes, general, if it is not already occupied by ther enemy. Them 'ar mottes ar' ginerally occupied, in sech weather, by red-skins, or ruffians o' sum sort, an' they'll be sure ter fight fer their grounds."

"True, but I don't fancy the notion of camping down in the open. Is there not another of these islands where we can find shelter by a few hours more of brisk ride?"

"Most likely, sir, and we will strike off a

little more to the north, curving gradually in that direction. But here, let me call yer attention ter sumthin' w'ich I reckon hes escaped yer eyes. D'ye know thet we're follered?"

"Followed! no! by whom, pray?"

"Dunno, sir, fer my eyes won't reach fur enough ter let me find out. But thar they are, about six miles back in the rear—jest in plain sight, now!"

All hands turned in their saddles, and gazed back over the ocean of white, in search of the sail of life, and, sure enough, two horsemen were seen far in the distance, on the crest of a prairie swell.

"They've follered us frum ther Settlement!" said Old Steuben, "an' I reckon they're up ter sum deviltry, or they'd hurry an' ketch up."

"I cannot imagine who it is, unless some of Tiger Track's men were in the Settlement when we left," said General Maynard, anxiously.

"Your idear is probably kerect!" replied the scout; "anyhow, they ken't do us no harm as long as they keep at sech a distance—thet's a fac'!"

The cavalcade now turned their course to the northwest, and made a wide detour around the motte General Maynard would have chosen for a camp.

"I guess we'd better not camp to-night," he said, addressing General Maynard, "but had better push on while there is darkness to cover us."

"And why not camp, scout?"

"Beca'se, general, we've got a ledly among us, an' I kno' ye wouldn't want her ha'r fingered by a red-skin's greasy fingers!"

"Great heaven, no. Why? do you apprehend danger from Indians to-night?"

"Mought heer frum ther red rips ef we war ter git in range o' 'em."

"Well, then we must keep moving and keep out of their way, for a charge on us and consequent loss of numbers must now be avoided if possible. On, men! Let no halt be made until an hour before daybreak."

And on galloped the cavalcade swiftly over the winter's snow.

Night now began to settle down rapidly, and with dense darkness. What few pale stars appeared in the heavens were insufficient to make light below. A ghastly paleness rising from the snow was all that afforded the travellers light by which to guide their course, when once night had drawn her shroud closely around.

Old Steuben now withdrew from the cavalcade at General Maynard's suggestion, and waited for a couple of hours upon the trail.

This was for the purpose of learning whether or not they were followed by either the two strange horsemen or by other foes.

But his two hours of watching and waiting resulted in no discovery, and he rode on and overtook the calvacade about midnight, at the edge of a belt of cottonwood timber.

"Well, what is the news?" General Maynard demanded, anxiously. "Did you see anything of the enemy?"

"No; I guess we have outwitted them, sir. Hev ye bin in this timber?"

"Yes—or I sent three of the boys, here, and they made a thorough search, without finding anything in the enemy line."

"Well, then we mought as well stop hayr an' rest, fer thar's no tellin' w'at ter-morrer'll bring forth."

They accordingly rode into the heart of the motte, where no snow had fallen, on account of the dense matting of tree-tops, and a camp-fire was built to keep off the cold of the night.

"We must post three sentinels around the border of the motte!" said Steuben, "to insure safety, and prevent any one getting into the timber unknown to us. I for one will stand guard. How is it with you, Cotton?" addressing an old grizzled trapper.

"All right, I'm willing——"

"And I will act as third sentinel!" announced May Maynard, eagerly, as she stepped forward, rifle in hand. "I would enjoy nothing better."

"But, young leddy, it's ruther out o' yer line, ain't et?"

"No, sir—it's just what I like, and I'll wager you can't go out on the prairie, and slip in past me, except I see and challenge you."

"Let her go, if she will," said General Maynard, coming up, with a smile. "I'll wager she'll take care of herself—and us, too, for she was not brought up without training!"

"All right—just as ye say!" replied Old Steuben; "but I'd not 'low et, ef she war my gal. Too risky, this puttin' a purty gal up fer an Injun target."

May took the station assigned her, however—had her own way, just as she usually did—on the eastern side of the motte, while Steuben took the southern, and Cotton patrolled the northern and western sides.

It was well along toward morning, the darkest part of night, when May saw two men riding directly toward the motte; and at the same time a fierce, vindictive yell went up from the southern end of the motte, followed by a rifle report.

Instantly she fired at one of the approaching horsemen, and with a curse he tumbled to the ground, but the other pressed on toward her.

"What is the matter?" demanded General Maynard, as he and half a dozen men came running out of the timber.

"Ruffians!" said May, slipping a fresh cartridge into her breech-loader.

"Red-skins, and old Sitting Bull at thet!" cried Old Steuben, dashing up, and then away again in an instant.

CHAPTER XIII

A LITTLE SCRIMMAGE AND A BIG STORM

"Did you fire, May?" asked the general, for a moment at a loss what to do. "I heard a rifle report."

"Yes, I fired, and dropped my man, sir," May replied, her eyes sparkling. "Here comes the other fellow, and I'll lay him out, providing he doesn't stop on hail! Halt! you ruffian, halt!" and her gleaming rifle bore directly down upon the approaching horseman.

But he heeded not her words, and despite her ringing rifle-shot his horse leaped forward to the edge of the motte, and the man slid from the saddle.

"You needn't hev bin so cursed imperdent!" he growled, limping a trifle, w'en a feller's tryin' ter warn ye o' ther red-skins. Most humans w'u'd been glad."

"Boover Legree!" cried May, stepping back in alarm.

"Yas, my daisy; but ye needn't be afeard o' me on 'em old scores, fur I'm heer fur a different purpose, ter-night. Ginerel, git yer men tergether, and go quick ter ther southern end o' ther motte, fer thar's nigh about a hundred o' Sittin' Bull's gang thar, an' Old Steuben fightin' 'em off. That's w'at's ther matter. Come ahead, you louts!" and away leaped the trader, with rifle in hand, to assist in repelling the attackers. Seeing that his purpose was evidently honest for the present, General Maynard ordered his men to follow his example, while he and May hurriedly brought up the rear.

There were now loud yells in the direction of the southern end of the motte, that were fierce and savage, and were followed by an accompaniment of rifle reports, which echoed fitfully out upon the night.

In three minutes they reached the battleground, to find Old Steuben assailed on every side by a swarm of copper-coloured

varmints; but the arrival of the scouts turned the tide somewhat, and it was a hand-to-hand conflict on every side—a desperate, determined struggle for victory on the part of both reds and whites.

"Sock et to 'em, boys!" yelled the guide, Old Steuben, as he did wonderful execution with both knife and revolver—"let the skunks hev et fer all ye're wu'th!"

One by one the savages went down, until full a score had fallen.

General Maynard had sent May back into the trees, for he feared for her to join in the battle, and he fought in the midst of the affray. But the struggle could not last for ever, and at last there was a signal whoop, then the savages quickly ceased fighting and withdrew out upon the prairie, leaving their dead, but dragging their wounded after them.

Morning was now dawning in the east, rapidly, and the whole party remained upon the battle-ground until the day was light enough to see how the field lay.

Then it was discovered that some twenty-five of the red-skins had been killed, while Sitting Bull and his remaining warriors had withdrawn to the prairie, a mile away, where they were grouped down, evidently awaiting action on the part of the whites.

"They mean to follow and torment us!" said General Maynard, turning to Old Steuben. "Sitting Bull is one of the worst demons on the frontier to battle with—a dogging cut-throat of snakish animosity!"

"Ye're right, thar, gineral!" agreed Steuben; "foot an' hand, thet old Bull's a hard 'un. But, 'tain't goin' ter benefit us ter stay hayr. Let's git out at once. Ef them cusses foller, we kin lend 'em a hand."

Accordingly arrangements were made to leave the motte, and continue on toward the Black Ranch, which Steuben declared could not now be over a half-day's journey further westward.

While preparations were being made, there was a little commotion, occasioned by Old Steuben, who had threateningly confronted the man Legree, who had declared it his intention to accompany the brigade.

The eccentric guide and trapper had confronted the trader, upon seeing him for the first time, with flaming eyes, and an expression of countenance which was savage.

"Ha! ha! Alf King, so you're here, are ye—here where your foes are thickest, and your life hangs on a thread? Good!

I'm glad of it—I want ye, presently—want to pay you a trifle I've owed you for years. But not now—we have no time to arrange duels over individual disturbances. General Maynard, you will please keep watch over the wretch, for he is a man of mine to deal with and must not escape. Shoot him down if he attempts it!"

"Who in ten thousand demons are you?" growled Legree, fiercely.

"It matters not who or what I am, you wolf. I am one who will do the world a favour by ridding it of you, for ever!" was the reply, as the guide turned away.

The cavalcade now mounted, and Legree was placed between two mounted guards.

They moved along—on over the white glistening snow-crust into the wilderness, at a jog trot.

A sharp look out was kept in the rear, and it was finally discovered that the savages were pursuing—were stealing along in the background at their leisure, with no apparent desire to overtake the enemy, yet.

"They're goin' ter find w'at our lay-out is, furst!" said Steuben, "an' then try an' nonpluss us." But I reckon w'en et comes ter snow, they'll hev ter git a big spy-glass 'twill find us."

On—on over the glistening waste of white the party advanced; then, after a couple of hours came a change—a quick clouding over of the sky to a sombre leaden hue, and a few feathery flakes of uncommon size began to descend hesitatingly.

In ten minutes after the first flakes had begun to fall, a perfect hurricane of snow was descending, and the brigade were wrapped in a ghostly mantle, as they urged on their horses through the terrible storm.

"Never saw anything like this before, I declare!" General Maynard growled, with a head-shake.

In the terrible blinding storm, it was hardly possible to advance in regularity, and so they scattered somewhat, each one picking a path for himself. It so happened that the trader, Boover Legree, was left unguarded and unnoticed by the rest of the brigade. But with a fiendish expression of satisfaction he followed on, now and then chuckling to himself as he heard May Maynard's clear, silvery voice ringing out through the storm, and muttering a curse when he thought of the scout, Old Steuben.

"Ef thet cuss knows me, an' he do fer he called me by name, I do not know him—can't think of an enemy of the past, whom he might be—unless—but 'shaw! that man is dead long ago, although Jake Toleman believes to the contrary. And the girl—

Jove! she's a queen to even what Agnes Wagner used to be, and ef I don't possess her ere the storm ceases, may I never be able to raise a villain's hand again."

And the man laughed low and crafty at some meditated plan of action. He lagged behind all the rest of the brigade, but watched those ahead of him as well as the storm would permit.

And he saw, with great satisfaction, that May Maynard was gradually falling behind the rest, her steed having grown contrary and lazy. She evidently was unmindful of the fact, and had forgotten the existence of a wolf in the fold.

Until she felt a strong grasp laid upon her shoulder, and looked around to discover that she was *alone* with the villain Legree her only companion! The brigade had left her behind!

"Help! help!" she screamed.

CHAPTER XIV

DEATH OR VICTORY IMPENDING

"Cuss ye, et won't do ye no good ter screech fer help!" growled Legree, rudely clapping his hand over May's mouth. "Ye'll find ye've fallen inter ther claws of a tiger!"

"I fear you not!" replied May, indignantly, "and I defy you. My friends are not far away, and will answer my cry."

"Will they, tho'? Mebbe so an' mebbe not. Jest you cum along wi' me, or you'll be sorry; none o' yer screechin' now, ef ye don't wanter get killed ter oncet."

And turning his horse's head sharply from the trail as it ran in a northerly course, he gave the beast a cruel jab of the spur and seized May's thoroughbred by the bits.

But when his horse bounded madly forward, May's balked in its tracks, and as a result the trader was jerked backward from the saddle on to the snow.

"Ha! ha! ha! That's the time you didn't make a point!" May exclaimed, with a laugh. Then she put her hand to her belt for a revolver, but to her surprise she did not find one there. They had all been removed, and her knife also.

"Ha! ha!" chuckled Legree, rising from his plunge into the snow.

"He laughs best who laughs last, my dove with clipped wings. I've got ye jest as completely in my power as I hed before!"

"No, sir-ee, you hain't!" exclaimed a voice, and who should ride in upon the scene but Josh Hemperhill, the Yankee. Hello!

darn my socks! I swow, ef et ain't Miss May and thet cuss I boosted once afore!"

And the eccentric Yankee covered the trader with his revolvers, while a grin of triumph spread over his countenance.

"Oh! Josh, is it you? I am so glad you have come!" May cried.

"Yas, I reckon ye must be sum'at tickled, seein's ye war in a fix," Josh replied, with unusual grimness. "Danger ginerally alters ther opinions o' ther female line. Fer instance, ye war orful tickled when ye got rid o' me by sendin' me off after Gold Rifle, but I notis Josh cums in mighty welcome about rescue time!"

"Oh! Josh, not quite so bad as that. But, did you find Gold Rifle?"

"Reckon so, an' lost him ag'in. Darn his picter, he left me in a motte ter wait fer his return, but ther outlaws got a leetle too hot, an' so I slid out fer ther fort."

"And what became of Gold Rifle?"

"Dunno. Started fer ther Black Ranch, an' didn't cum back. Guess as how he got gobbled up by ther ruffians, or mebbe he's all hunky. But, where's the rest o' ther folks—how'd ye git out hayr?"

"There's more ahead, toward the north——"

"No, they're here, now!" exclaimed a voice, and General Maynard and the brigade rode forward.

"What's the cause of this delay, May, my child?"

"There's the cause, papa!" May replied, pointing to Legree, who was cowering under the bearing of Hemperhill's pistols. "The villain tried to carry me off, but failed when Josh came up and showed his hand."

"Ha! is this so? Josh, you're a trump! Boys, seize the accursed ruffian and bind his hands, and leave him alone here on the prairie, without his horse. If he gets out without freezing or starving, it's all the punishment I care to give him."

The order was executed to the letter and Legree was left alone in mid-prairie, while the brigade resumed its course, with Josh in company.

May rode by his side, and when no one was near, questioned him concerning Gold Rifle, who was now the centre of all interest to her.

"Do you think Gold Rifle was captured by the outlaws, Josh?"

"Dunno! Guess he's smart enough ter hoe his own row."

"What did he say when you gave him the letter?"

"Sumthin' about yer invitin' him ter yer birthday party. Neow, see hyar, Miss May,

ye'r' goin' et a leetle ter strong ter suit my notion, an' ef ye don't stop, I'll hev ter sue yer fer breeches o' promis', swow ter gracious ef I won't ! "

" Josh, you silly fellow, I hope you don't imagine for a moment that there is any engagement existing between us, or that I love you ? No ! no ! you must not be so blind and foolish. I like and respect you as a friend and all that, but as for marrying you, I could not think of such a thing."

" Then ye aire fishing after Gold Rifle, eh ? Ye calkylate he'll fit yer ideas better'n me, eh ? "

" I don't know, Josh ; but don't you think we'd make a better match, he being nearer my own age ? "

" Yas, mebbe ye'r' right, an' I won't kick so hard ef ye ain't a-goin' ter let Pat Dolan, the Irisher, inter yer good graces."

" I promise that, Josh, for Pat's at home, and we're off here, and liable to be for some time."

The snowstorm continued with unabated fury, and it grew more and more difficult to urge the horses along, for at every step they sank deep in the feathery bed.

" Hark ! did you hear that ? " demanded General Maynard, as a terrible roar in the distance was distinctly audible, and fairly shook the earth.

" What does it mean, Steuben ? "

" Thet war an avalanche w'at hes slid frum top ter ther fut o' Earthquake range which ar' off ter our nor'west, thirteen or less miles.

Josh at this juncture rode forward in his eccentric way, to give some intelligence,

" Miss May tells me ye're s'archin' fer ther Black Ranch, gineral. Ef thet's so, ye'd better go keerful, as ye may bunk up ag'in' it, kerslap, afore ye know et. 'Tain't fur ahead," and then Josh related what he knew of Gold Rifle's attempt to penetrate the ranch.

" The rash youth undoubtedly has received death at the hands of the outlaws for his reckless venture," said General Maynard, anxiously. " He should never have attempted such a feat, except with plenty of aid near at hand to back him."

" Oh ! he'll git thar all the same, an' don't ye forgit et ! " put in Old Steuben, quickly.

" I know a few feet o' thet lad, an'll bet my rifle he goes through ef it's through fire an' water."

So they kept on, and the day drew toward a close. But Steuben was right, and just when night was falling thickly, they found a small motte of cottonwoods, whose densely-matted branches had prevented the

snow from reaching the ground, leaving a fine camping-spot for the toil-worn brigade. A search of the timber revealed no enemies, and a rousing camp-fire was built, and all gathered around it to partake of their evening meal.

The evening was spent in warming and eating, around the great fire ; then all turned in to sleep, except Steuben and another scout, who stood guard at the western and northern sides of the motte. About midnight the snow ceased to fall as abruptly as it had come, and in half an hour the sky was clear, and a few stars hung pendent in the heavens.

It was getting along toward morning when Old Steuben's sharp eye caught a glimmer of light out upon the western prairie, such as might have emanated from the torch of some night-traveller. It was visible for some time, and then totally disappeared.

" Well, scout, what does it mean ? " It was General Maynard who spoke, he having come out from the camp so silently that Steuben had failed to hear him. " Do you think that enemies are approaching ? "

" Guess it luks thet way, gineral. 'Spect some o' the outlaws, or else red-skins aire makin' fer this yere clump. In which case thar's bound ter be a rumpus. Hev ther boys hed enough sleep ? "

" Probably ; shall I awaken them ? "

" Yas, an' tell 'em ter git ther pop-guns ready, fer thar'll be work inside o' half an' hour. What is it, Dave ? "—this to the other sentinel, who had returned from the northern and eastern side of the motte. " Any signs o' danger ? "

" Reckon so ; thar's a band o' fellers wi' torches approachin' ther motte from ther east, and I reckon as how it's ther outlaws."

" Then we're bound ter git it on both sides, eh ? Wal, ef we divide up right, we can make et musical fer 'em, they not knowin' our exact number. Daybreak is close at hand, w'ich is fortunate in itself."

It was nearer than he was aware, and it was soon light enough so that a good view could be had of the prairie for several miles in any direction. The ambushed scouts were also able to make another discovery.

Not a mile away, on the crest of a prairie-billow, was a large, barn-like structure, inclosed within a high plank fence—the Black Ranch, of which they were in search, although it was now white with the fallen snow.

" That's the Black Ranch, gineral," said Old Steuben, " whar ye say yer daughter is, an'et's a tough old place to attack, I tell ye."

Little Master Jack, who had been fetched along with the brigade, under the charge of an old trapper, was brought forward, and instantly recognized the building, and gave a shout of delight.

"Black Ranch!" he articulated. "Jack want to see his mamma; she over in big house."

"And, God granting, you soon shall see her, my pet," the general said, tenderly.

The men were all aroused and put in readiness for a coming combat. One party of the enemy were approaching from the east, and one from the west, each numbering about a score of men, who were undoubtedly outlaws of the notorious Tiger Track's band.

The eastern enemy were the nearest, and it was not until they were less than a mile away that it was discovered that they were armed with rifles of a long range make. This was discovered by aid of a field-glass.

"Thet puts a new aspect ter ther case!" Old Steuben said, "and ef we ever calkylate ter git out o' this wi' our skulps on, we've got ter do sum o' ther tallest fightin' on record. White Injuns, an' lots of 'em at ther same time; aire a dose I ain't fond of."

Half of the men were distributed along the eastern side of the motte, and half along the western; then with fast-beating hearts they waited for the enemy to come within rifle range.

Death or victory was impending.

CHAPTER XV

OUT OF DANGER

It was a terrible fact that the words of Gold Rifle expressed.

"My God! we are in the path of an avalanche!"

Above, the storm-bound mountains rose sheer and declivitous; around them the whirling snow was a feathery vortex; above all came that ominous, frightful roar.

"A what?" Mrs. Wagner demanded, growing deathly pale; "a——"

"An avalanche!" Gold Rifle repeated, scarcely above a whisper. "We are doomed, unless we can get out of the way in four minutes or less!"

He stood not an instant idle, but worked even while he spoke. He had kicked away the lately fallen snow until he came down to the hard-frozen crust beneath. Then with his stout hunting-knife he cut out a

large block of this crust. Below the snow was soft and unpacked—easy to penetrate.

"Quick! quick!" he gasped—"help scoop out a hole with your hands—there is not a second to be lost!"

Both Gold Rifle and his mother set desperately, almost wildly to work in digging a trench below the crust—they worked like mad, hurling the snow out and deepening their excavation. The avalanche glided on with accelerating velocity; was not ten yards away, when they lay flat in the trench, and Gold Rifle pulled the dislodged crust into its former position above them.

Then the very mountains seemed to quake and tremble, as the giant mass of snow and ice passed over them, and plunged in a huge bank among the foothills, with a roar like an ocean hurricane. Gold Rifle's ingenuity had saved them.

For when the terrible avalanche had passed, he raised the cake, and they emerged from the mountain-side, unharmed.

And with an inward prayer of thanksgiving for their escape, they continued the ascent of the steep mountain-side. Gold Rifle had to lead, and with a heavy stick make indentations in the crust in which to step, or they could not have advanced a rod without slipping back a yard or more.

In the course of half an hour they arrived in front of an overhanging cliff of rock, in which was a large round hole—the entrance to the cave Gold Rifle had spoken of.

At first he hesitated to enter, fearing he might be imperilling his mother by taking her into a bear's den.

But reconnaissance dispelled this idea, and they entered, to find it a snug little cavern of twenty by sixteen feet, dry, and not ill-smelling. It had evidently been inhabited before, as there were evidences of tenancy—a broken kettle, a lantern, and firewood piled up in one corner.

"Ha! this is just the place we are looking for," Gold Rifle exclaimed, gladly. "Here we can remain until I find my father, or until the storm stops, and then I'll take you to the fort. It's a good round forty miles, but we can do it easily in a couple of days afoot, by cutting across by a route I have in view."

We return to the brigade whom we left in the prairie wilderness, lying low for the coming of the enemy.

General Maynard and Josh Hemperhill had charge of the half-score of men who lay within the motte on the eastern side, while Old Steuben with May Maynard—

Captain May, as she was called—commanded the western approach, with nine men. The tenth, an old trapper, had been left in the centre of the motte in charge of little Master Jack.

The eastern gang of outlaws were approaching the fastest, and would soon be within range, while those advancing from the west came on more leisurely.

Nearer and nearer the outlaws rode, evidently unsuspectingly, and then, when they were within easy rifle range, General Maynard gave the word, and the crack of half a score of rifles echoed over the wilderness in white. Then as many men of the approaching band reeled in their saddles, and four dropped lifeless upon the snow. The others, however, retained their seats—there was a fierce, vindictive yell, and the ruffians came charging on like mad.

"Lay low, boys—now, one, two, three and *fire!*" ordered the general, grimly, and again the death-dealing repeaters of the brigade spoke, and six outlaws dropped back out of the saddles, never to follow the war-path again.

"Hurray! thet's ther kind fer ye, boyees—character-plated, war every one o' them bullets, an' luk at their execution!" cried Josh.

"Yes—there's only ten left on this side, boys, but they're comin' like thunder, and you'll have to work quick!" cried the general. And he spoke the truth. The outlaws were spurring their animals and goading them on, although it was but feebly they floundered through the deep snow.

All were masked and armed with rifles and army revolvers, and they were a desperate looking set of men.

"I tell ye what!" exclaimed an old trapper, "I've diskivered one p'int ahead o' ye, boys. Thet chap thar in ther lead's none other than the cussed galoot they call Tiger Track, an' I know it."

"How d'ye know et, Greckel?"

"Beca'se I war once tuk a prisoner by him, but escaped."

"Lay low, boys!" cautioned General Maynard. "Hark! the devils have attacked t'other side. Hurry up—let's clean out these roughs, an' join ther rest o' ther boys. One—two—three——"

And again a report of ten rifles rang out, and every saddle was emptied although some of the outlaws were not killed, but severely wounded, and left lying upon the prairie by the horses which were skurrying away in nearly every direction.

Without waiting to look after the

wounded, General Maynard and his men hurried to the western side of the motte, where they found a hot contest waging. A number of bullets had been exchanged, but no one killed.

The outlaws on this side were a round score, in number, and fiercely urged on by no less than the two ruffian traders, Jacob Toleman and Boover Legree, who in some inexplicable way had joined in with the outlaws.

Old Steuben had been badly wounded in both arms, and could no longer participate in the affray, but he cheered on the men, and kept them wide awake to the enemy's weak points.

"You see them two men, Josh!" he said, pointing out the ruffian traders to the Yankee. "Waal, them chaps aire after Miss May, an' ef ye don't put a buzzer in their ears, I'll no longer count ye a pard."

And, in the next charge that was made, both Legree and Toleman fell, mortally wounded. Several of the brigade were hard hit, but they poured such a destructive volley into the ruffians that they "turned tail," to use a western phrase, and beat an ignominious retreat.

"I tell ye what!" averred Old Steuben. "I've jest got an idear o' what ther row is wi' them chaps. There's but a dozen o' 'em left, an' they calkylate they ain't strong enough to hold ther ranch, w'ich is undoubtedly empty. So they're goin' ter light out an' quit this country."

"Perhaps you're right," assented General Maynard, "and after we have gathered in our prisoners we'll attempt to investigate the matter. Ail hands, now, assist in bringing in the wounded."

It was a work that occupied considerable time, and eighteen in all were brought in of the outlaws, and their hands and feet bound, and their wounds skilfully dressed. Among them was Tiger Track. On removing the mask of Tiger Track, it was a great surprise to the men of the Settlement to behold the sinister, evil face of the dead trader's son—the bullying Jay Toleman, whom we introduced at the beginning of our narrative.

The excitement of this discovery had not yet wholly abated when Old Steuben, who had been on a scout, came rushing into camp with long leaps.

"The ranch! the ranch!" he cried, "it is all afire!"

CHAPTER XVI

BORDER JUSTICE

It was indeed true—the Black Ranch was wrapt in flames.

"God forbid that my daughter Mabel is in yonder building now!" General Maynard said, anxiously, "for no earthly power can save that outlaws' stronghold. See; yonder is a horseman just leaving the gates and flying southward. He is evidently the fire-fiend in this case."

"Sum galoot, like enough, who hed sum grudge agi'n' the outlaws!" suggested Old Steuben. "I reckon thet Gold Rifle succeeded in rescuin' yer darter, gineral, an' thet's w'at started the outlaws abroad."

"I truly hope that such may be the case, scout, for to have my long-lost daughter restored to my arms, would be one of the greatest joys I can imagine in my old age. Of her I have ever carried a hope—that we would meet again."

"D'ye think, general, thet ef ye war ter hev yer daughter restored to you, that ye could freely forgive her past desertion o' you, an' also forgive the at-one-time outlawed husband with whom she fled, providing he had reformed from the past inter a man o' men?"

"Yes, scout, most freely would I forgive them both and take them to my heart in my declining age, for except my dear May, here, I have no one to love or care for me. But, why do you speak thus, scout—what know you of my daughter and her husband?"

"I simply know that Wild Walt will be rejoiced, sir, and embrace an early opportunity to take a place at your family board as your future stay and support. But, enough of this; see, the building is now going rapidly, and soon the Black Ranch will no longer be a thing of existence. What do you propose to do with the outlaws, general?"

"I propose to give them an immediate trial, and string 'em up, if the verdict so decides," was the stern reply. "I think there will be sufficient evidence against them, and I'm satisfied that they wouldn't have granted us even the mercy of a trial."

All hands stood upon the edge of the motte and watched the burning of the Black Ranch—watched the flames lick up the wood fiercely, until the great pile, fence and all, was reduced to a bed of ashes and glowing coals.

Then the party went back to the camp, in the heart of the motte, and preparations were made for the trial of the outlaws.

"General Maynard assumed the position of judge at the request of the little band, and

opened the court with a stirring speech, relating how the country had lately been scourged by bold, lawless men who had raided, thieved and destroyed homes without number: and he wound up with a request that the gentlemen present who knew anything concerning the outlaws would step forward and be sworn, and give their testimony.

An old "vet," by the name of Darrel, came forward, was sworn, and declared that Tiger Track and his band had raided his home but a year ago, murdered his wife and mother, and robbed him of stock and money.

Another man, from Cheyenne, testified that he had seen Tiger Track stab a man to death, in an upper settlement, and then escape.

Still another testified that he had been one of a train crossing the plains on the previous summer, which had been attacked by Tiger Track's band, and all hands save himself and teamster were murdered.

"This is enough, Gentlemen of the Jury, to satisfy the minds of any honest men. But, if there's any more testimony, let's have it."

"There is!" exclaimed a voice, and who should ride forward into the space where the border court was held but Gold Rifle. "I can testify, and swear to it, if necessary, that I was recently captured by old Jacob Toleman, and Tiger Track's outlaws, and taken into the Black Ranch, where I was pitched into a pit, where there were many dead bodies, some of them recently placed there, others decayed and nothing but skeletons left. That they were victims of the outlaws, there can be no doubt, and as a detective, I vote that the inhuman scoundrels all be strung up!"

"And so they shall be. Gentlemen of the Jury, you have heard the testimony of witnesses. You may retire to consider the case."

"No need o' that, gineral!" said Old Steuben, who formed one of the decisive body known as the "Jury." "We don't leave our seats fer sech cases as this, but unanimously say 'Guilty,' an' so string 'em up, ter oncet. Thet's w'at they deserve, accordin' ter our agreement—eh, boyees?"

"Ay! ay!" responded the Jury.

"Then in the name of the law, which we have of necessity taken into our own hands, I sentence each and every one of the prisoners to be lynched in the southern end of this motte, and may God have mercy upon their souls."

The words were hardly spoken, ere the trappers and traders composing the brigade, sprang forward to do the work, which, according to their views, was justice.

In vain the poor wretches begged and entreated—all except Tiger Track, or Jay Toleman, but it was of no use. The resolution of the Regulators was not to be broken.

At last all of the outlaws had been removed to the southern end of the motte, and all of the brigade except four had gone to witness the "sport," for in the remote West, a good old-fashioned lynching is considered by the frontiersman next to the Fourth of July.

The four remaining behind were General Maynard, Gold Rifle, Old Steuben and May. The quartette stood facing each other for some moments—expectancy upon the faces of the general and the scout.

Gold Rifle stood with arms folded, a half-humorous expression upon his countenance, and a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"Well," he said, glancing from one to another, "I take it, by your looks, that you're expecting something of me."

"And you're exactly right," replied Old Steuben, with a laugh. "We're expecting *much* of you. But, first, let us know each other. Kit, my son, this is your grandfather, General Maynard, and this young lady, your aunt, I suppose. General, and Miss May, this is your relative, Kit Deronda, detective."

"We are glad to meet you, young man," the general said, extending his hand, "and although it is a little surprise at this time, I must confess that I've had an inkling of our relationship, suggested by my darling adopted daughter, May. But, Steuben, you say 'my son'; can it be possible that you are the Wild Walt Wagner with whom my daughter fled, years ago?"

"The same, general," and the old scout-guide threw off a wig and false beard, and a handsome-looking man of thirty-eight stood revealed.

"Then, praise God, for I am reunited to my dear father, husband and children!" cried a voice, and Mrs. Wagner, so long lost to loving hearts, rushed into the scene, and fell into the open embrace of Wild Walt.

Such a glad reunion! The two men, husband and father, went into ecstasies over the returned one, and while they were engaged thus, Gold Rifle or Kit Deronda, turned to Miss May, who was standing a little aloof, holding Master Jack by the hand.

"Well, Miss Maynard, this seems to be a gladsome moment, does it not? and it occurs

to me, just now, that we must be brother and sister, eh, or aunts and uncles, or——"

"Only by adoption, sir!" May replied, a painful flush rising to her cheek. "I have lately found that I am not General Maynard's own daughter, but an adopted one—the child of an old army officer, named Faulkland. Therefore I am an outsider, but I cannot help feeling overjoyed all the same at the happy turn of events."

"Which shows the goodness of your heart. And I'm right glad, too, that you are no relation to me, although I would love to have a sister. I suppose this is my little brother whom I have never seen."

After the exchange of a few more words, May and Gold Rifle joined the others, where Wild Walt was speaking.

"I joined an outlaw band, general, after I fled, accompanied by your daughter. In the community in which you lived at that time, I was nearly unknown, and the name of detective had been little heard. I was a detective on my own hook, and joined the outlaws purposely to ascertain their force, and how to successfully break them up. I was made their chief, and known as Wild Walt Wagner. I had not been forty-eight hours with them when I was seen and recognized by a party of hunters, and branded as an outlaw. It was useless now to leave them, as death awaited me outside of their ranks. So I stayed until the goodness of my wife, here, caused me to flee from them, with our little boy. I hid myself, but Alf King, one of the men, stole away my wife, and she was appropriated, later, by Dolph Carew, known to you as Toleman, Jr. With him she came to this country, and she has just told me that the wretch forced her to marry him. The little boy, here, is a result of their union. But he shall never lack for a father, in me, and now that we are all reunited in one happy family, I see no reason why we should ever part."

May Faulkland had her birthday party after all, and a brilliant affair it was, to which all the soldiers and trappers were invited. Gold Rifle was present, and on that auspicious occasion found time to whisper his love-dream to the fair May. In due course they became engaged, and in the following spring they were united in matrimony.

THE END

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